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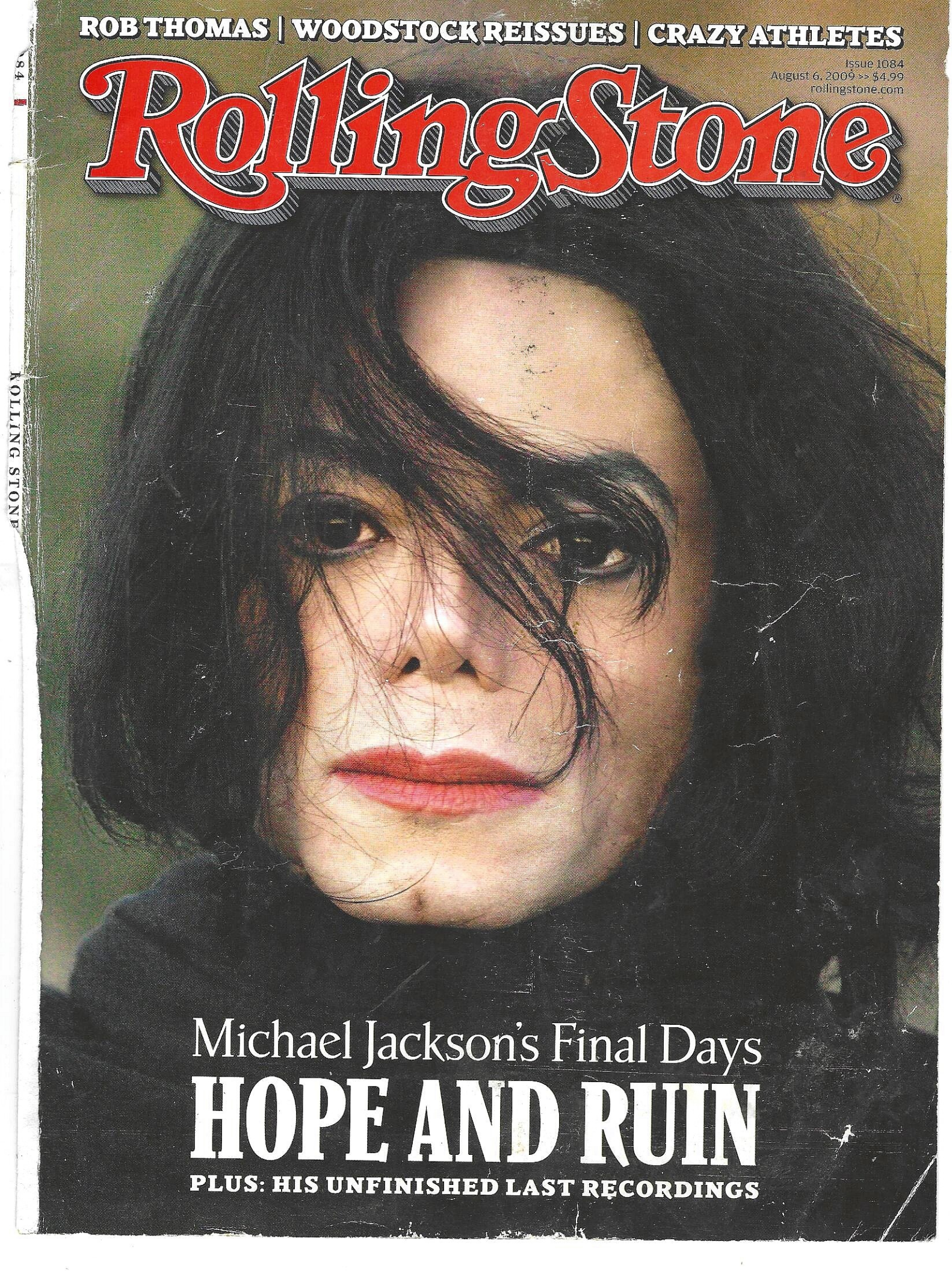

Michael Jackson's Final Days

HOPE AND RUIN

PLUS: HIS UNFINISHED LAST RECORDINGS

ever broken something just to learn how to fix it?

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RS1084 "All the News That Fits"

BEEN A LONG TIME Prince Charles honoring Plant as a Commander of the British Empire

JOHNNY GREEN/POOL/AP IMAGES

Rock & Roll Royalty

ON JULY 10TH, LED ZEPPELIN FRONTMAN ROBERT Plant was named a Commander of the British Empire for his "services to popular music." But don't go calling him "Sir Robert" just yet. CBE is an honor not quite on the level of knighthood, and Plant's still outranked by a veritable supergroup of rock royalty including Sir Paul, Sir Mick Jagger and Sir Elton, who are all actual knights. Plant can pull rank on bandmate Jimmy Page, who was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for his charity work in 2005. But there's no competition, Plant said at the ceremony. "We're still good friends," he added. "We both enjoy a rather dark sense of humor that comes, I think, from being on the wrong side of the tracks for all those wild years."

COVER STORY

Michael Jackson's Final Comeback

In the last months of his life, the pop icon plotted an epic return with new songs and a huge tour. Behind the scenes of his last shot at redemption. *By Claire Hoffman* **44**

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Obama's Real Reform

The president is on the verge of shutting down the private lenders who prey on college kids – which would free up $87 billion in federal aid. *By Tim Dickinson* **41**

FEATURES

Confessions of a Pop Star

With the release of his most personal album, Rob Thomas opens up about his past – the violent childhood, the drugs – and how he survived it. *By Erik Hedegaard*..... **54**

FEATURES

Death of a Freerider

Sam Brown was a legendary extreme mountain biker who went from defying gravity to smuggling millions of dollars of pot across the U.S.-Canada border. *By Jesse Hyde*..... **58**

ROCK & ROLL

Rock Hall Turns 25

U2, Springsteen, Clapton and more to celebrate Rock & Roll Hall of Fame's 25th anniversary. **PLUS:** Inside U2's tour ...*13*

Q&A

Kid Rock

On monogamy, Twittering and his new tour with Lynyrd Skynyrd *24*

PROFILE

Levon Helm Returns

The legend's Midnight Rambles set the stage for his best album in decades *26*

SPECIAL SECTION

Sports on the Edge

From NASCAR's wild man to extreme surfers to *Nitro Circus*: Meet the world's most fearless athletes *67*

RECORDS

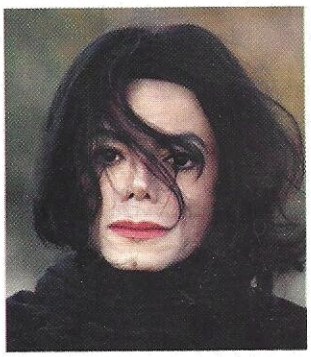
The Sound of Woodstock

New sets of discs present the most comprehensive account of the festival to date. **PLUS:** Daughtry's back..... *75*

MOVIES

'Funny People'

Judd Apatow snags Adam Sandler and Seth Rogen for his warmest, most personal film yet. **PLUS:** *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* ...*87*



On the Cover

Michael Jackson photographed at Neverland Ranch in October 2005.

Photograph by Jonathan Exley
Contour by Getty Images

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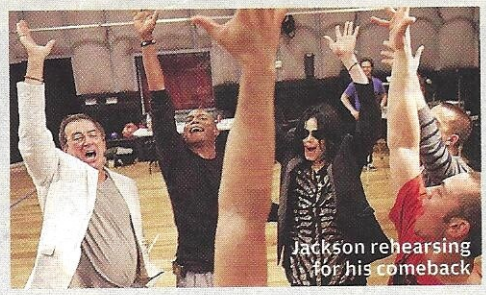


Jackson rehearsing for his comeback

Remembering Michael

Photos, video and cover stories from the RS archives tracing Jackson's remarkable career – on the road with the Jackson 5 in 1971, at home with the pop king in 1983, his seclusion at Neverland Ranch and beyond.
PLUS: Watch his greatest moments, from Motown to his pop coronation. *rollingstone.com/michaeljacksonremembered*

ON THE SCENE

The Return of Blink-182

Photos and a live report as pop punk's progenitors – Mark Hoppus, Travis Barker and Tom DeLonge – launch their reunion tour in Las Vegas (where else?). *rollingstone.com/rockdaily*

TIMELINE

Rob Thomas: How Far He's Come

A photo portfolio of the hitmaker's platinum-plated career, from wide-eyed Matchbox Twenty frontman to acclaimed songwriter to chart-topping solo artist. *rollingstone.com/issue1084*

AUDIO

Inside a Punk Classic

Clash drummer Topper Headon demonstrates how he wrote "Rock the Casbah" on the piano. *rollingstone.com/rockdaily*

ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

Athletes Without Fear

More of the boldest and strongest in sports, from hard-hitting Pittsburgh Steelers safety Troy Polamalu to high-kicking cage fighter Gina Carano. *rollingstone.com/issue1084*

The Road to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

A video retrospective of Bruce Springsteen's journey to immortality – as he joins other legends celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. *rollingstoneextras.com/amex*

VIDEO

The Fray Unplugged

An acoustic set from the Denver group, including its hit "You Found Me" and a cover of Joan Osborne's "St. Teresa." *rollingstone.com/issue1084*

Juliette Lewis

The actress-singer debuts the results of her collaboration with the Mars Volta's Omar Rodriguez-López. *rollingstone.com/issue1084*

Art Brut Live

Video of the Brit-punk band's set, including "Emily Kane" and B side "Positively 5th St." *rollingstone.com/issue1084*

BLOGS

Report From All Points West

A breakdown of the bands you should not miss at the East Coast's premier rock festival (July 31st-August 2nd). Plus: photos and live reports. *rollingstone.com/rockdaily*

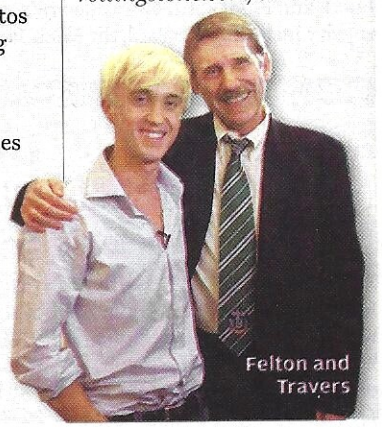
The Travers Take

You've seen what he does with a wand, now check out his skills on the acoustic guitar: Draco Malfoy himself, Tom Felton, visits Peter Travers for his latest "Off the Cuff" interview. *rollingstone.com/travers*

GUIDE

Living the Extreme Dream

Five places guaranteed to rattle your nerves, from racing school to surf camp. *rollingstone.com/corona*



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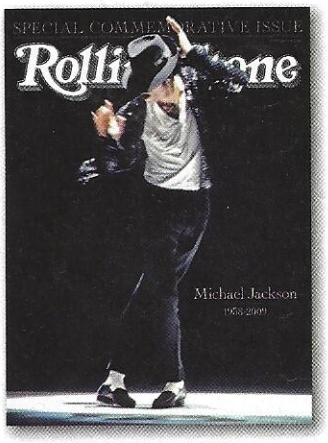
Editor's Notes

Michael's Comeback

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, we'd probably remember Thursday, June 25th, as the day when Joe Perry (shorter in person than you'd expect) came by to play us his new solo album. But as we were saying our goodbyes to him and getting ready to go home and tell everybody what a nice guy Perry is, the surreal interrupted. At first, it was just a rumor: Michael Jackson had been rushed to a hospital. A little later, someone at CNN called to say Jackson was dead already, but they couldn't report it until it was officially confirmed. The more seen-it-all among us assumed it was a hoax – Michael's elaborate ploy to get out of his scheduled London concerts. The rest of us dug out our copies of *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* and invited Michael to remind us how great he'd once been.



MAN ON THE COVER
Jackson's special RS edition

Since then, there's been a lot of Michael around here. A week of all-nighters went into a special edition of ROLLING STONE (on newsstands now, or you can order it from BarnesandNoble.com). Then we shifted out of tribute mode to produce this issue's cover story on Michael's last days – and his surprisingly close call with artistic redemption. Contributing editor Claire Hoffman burrowed deep into Jackson's tangled web of genius and delusion. Perhaps her most surprising discovery was how deeply invested Michael was in making the London shows his greatest ever. The world may have written him off, but Michael never stopped believing that he was the King of Pop. And even as he walled himself off from the world, he was still able to make believers out of the select few he invited into his personal fantasyland.

The irony, of course, is that in the end Michael Jackson never had to go through the arduous task of convincing the world of what he knew all along: Without playing one show, or releasing even one new song, he pulled off the biggest comeback ever.

—WILL DANA, *Managing Editor*

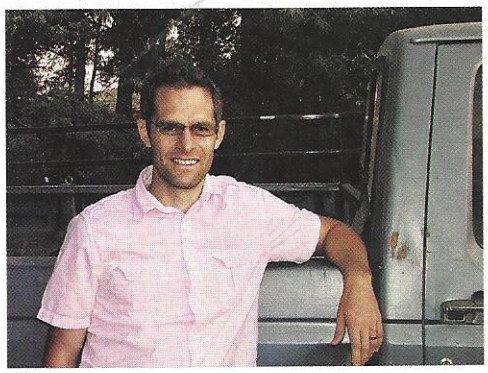
THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS

Claire Hoffman

"I've never worked on a story that so many were chasing," the contributing editor says. "I'd show up for an interview, and 40 reporters would be there." But Hoffman had unique access to Michael Jackson: She lives a mile from where he died. "People are there with their kids," she says. "It's like a tourist attraction: 'Disneyland, check. Michael Jackson's house, check.'"

Jesse Hyde

For his first RS story, Salt Lake City writer Hyde tells the tale of Sam Brown, a 24-year-old mountain-biker-turned-drug-smuggler. Hyde, who grew up on a livestock ranch in Fallon, Nevada – "a little town outside Reno known for, um, whorehouses," he says – went to Columbia journalism school and has written about polygamist killers, white supremacists and teen hitmen who worked for drug cartels.



SCOTT HYDE (BOTTOM); STACEY HOFFMAN

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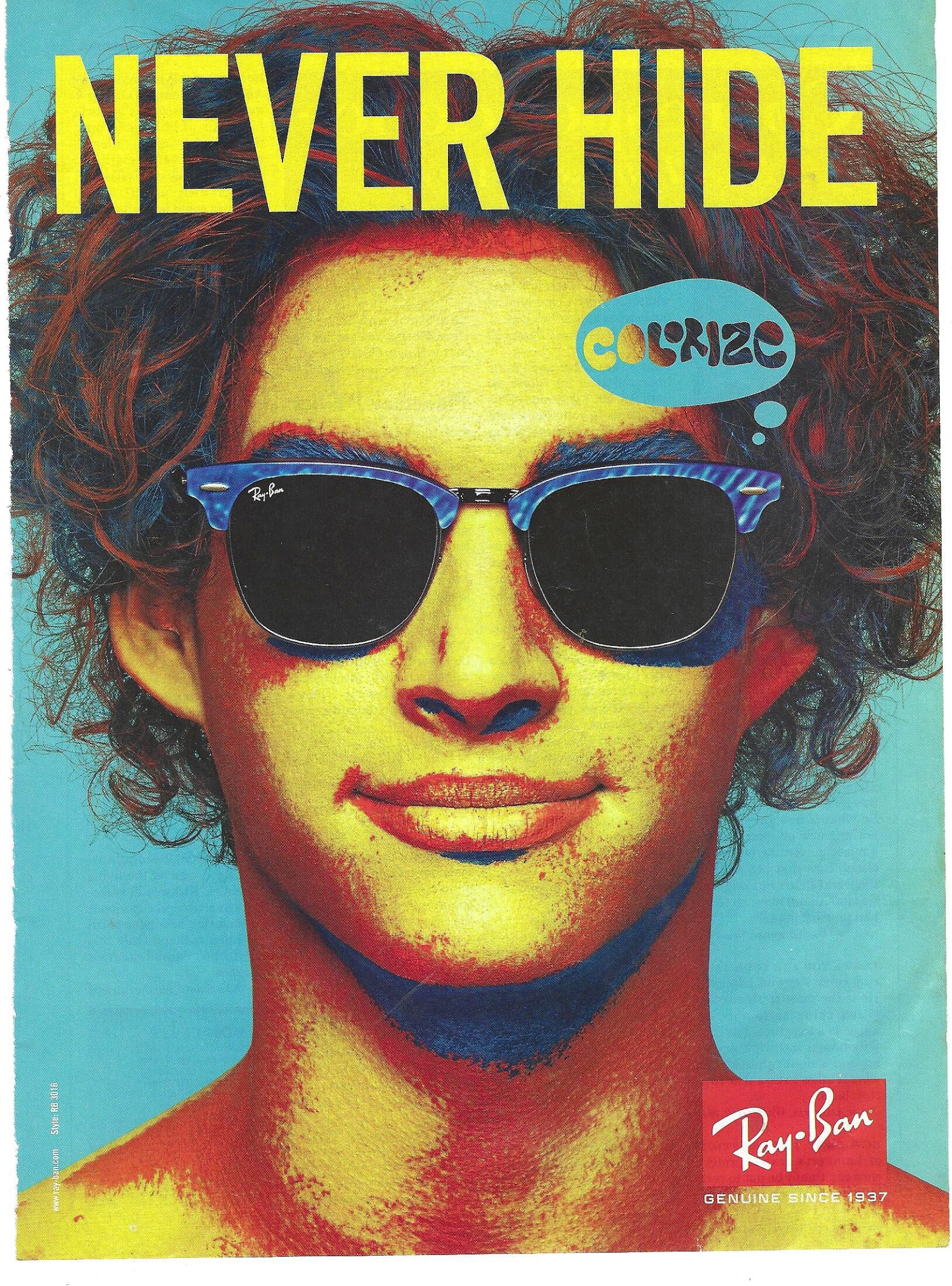
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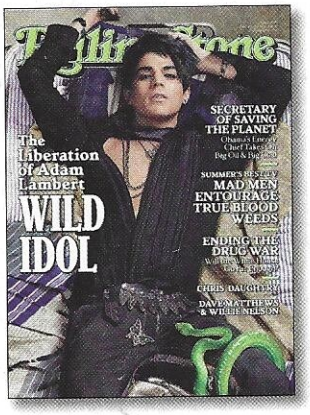

America's Idol

BRAVO ON THE INSIGHTFUL cover story "Wild Idol: The Liberation of Adam Lambert" [RS 1081]. Your story captures the essence of an enigmatic, complex man on the cusp of becoming an international superstar. You nailed it, allowing Adam to speak so clearly that I could hear his voice coming off the page. This article at the start of it all will be legend.

Kimberly Page, Chicago

LAMBERT IS A SECOND-RATE glam-rocker wanna-be who was pimped on *American Idol*. So what if he's gay? There's nothing new or special about a musician coming out of the closet. Now that he's out and the world didn't implode, can we (and Adam) move on to actual pressing issues?

Scott Brenner, New York

THANK YOU FOR YOUR AMAzing cover story on Lambert. He is the most fresh and exciting thing to happen to music in a long time. His brutally honest interview proves beyond a doubt that he has what it takes to be a true rock star: balls.

Katie Anderson, Waite Park, MN

NOW THAT THE QUESTION of Lambert's sexual preference can finally be put to rest, people can focus on him for what he really is: a courageous, gorgeous, excitingly talented, universally sexy Rock God. Mushrooms, *American Idol*, whatever. I don't care how he got here, as long as he's here.

Janet Bosse, Nutley, NJ

I AM HAPPY LAMBERT FEELS liberated after his interview with RS, but I felt some of his comments in your story were crude and unnecessary. I'm still a huge fan, but I hope he tempers his language in future interviews.

Susan Lee, Plymouth, MI

I THOUGHT A BAND OR ARTist's hard work and determination earned them the cover. Remind me again what Lambert's contribution to mainstream music is?

John Barrett, via the Internet

THIS ISSUE REPRESENTS what your magazine was born to be. Three features on three totally different people: Lambert; Obama's energy secretary, Steven Chu; and Conor Oberst. All three are pivotal to an America undergoing a time of reinvention and rebirth. Who knew a pop star, a science genius and a singer-songwriter could have so much in common? Maybe they should get together for dinner.

Joe Cooper, San Francisco

Cosmic Conor

"CONOR OBERST'S MYSTIcal Awakening" [RS 1081] was epic. The article helped me understand Oberst's drive for escape, his interest in spirituality and his need for a couple of good times with good friends. Thank you for this great article.

Corinna Puente, El Paso, TX

WHY IS ROLLING STONE'S "best songwriter of 2008" playing second fiddle to the runner-up of a cheesy reality show? If Oberst painted himself green and came out of the closet, would he have got the cover?

Jessalynn Norvell, Portland, OR

THANK YOU FOR THE ARTIcle on Oberst. You are forgiven for the *Gossip Girl* cover.

Casey Jackson, Omaha, NE

Planetary Politics

IT'S REFRESHING TO HEAR in "The Secretary of Saving the Planet" [RS 1081] that good science is making headway against special interests in Washington. Steven Chu seems like the right man to lead us into an era where environmental consciousness becomes a habit, not a fashionable platform.

Anthony Browne, Pittsburgh

IT'S GREAT TO SEE THAT the current administration values scientific intelligence over political savvy. There's no longer any room for mistakes in Washington. Chu is an inspiration for all of us younger people who want to see this country prepare and adapt to the always-uncertain future.

Joseph Stern, Middlebury, VT

WHILE CHU'S PREDICTIONS about CO_2 reaching 550 parts per million were alarming, I feel slightly better knowing there are backup solutions such as enzyme carbon capture that could reverse the effects of greenhouse gases.

Michael Virga, Seattle

The Endless War

"A DRUG WAR TRUCE?" [RS 1081] isn't good enough. Consumption of marijuana has been part of mainstream America for decades. Government at all levels has wasted hundreds of billions in our useless battle against illegal drugs. Why not allow marijuana use and include a sales tax on legal distribution? These revenues could be used to offset any medical costs for those who may abuse a substance. Since a majority of Americans now support legalization, this progressive legislation should be supported on a bipartisan basis by Congress, along with the president.

Larry Penner, Great Neck, NY

I FOUND "A DRUG WAR TRUCE?" to be a very honest and insightful look at where the administration stands on drug policy. During the campaign, I hoped that Obama would be a champion of drug-policy reform; it is sad to see that now he has taken a more conservative approach. If this administration is serious about reform, it needs to rethink how we approach the drug problem in this country.

Lewis Warfield, New York

Puppets Return

THANKS, ROLLING STONE, for an insightful story about the Meat Puppets [RS 1081] – an often forgotten band from grunge's heyday. Reading Austin Scaggs' view of the living hell of Cris Kirkwood's addiction was a visceral experience – a haunting reminder of all the fallen rockers. Only this time, luckily, one did rise from the ashes.

John Shortt, via the Internet

"Who knew a pop star, a science genius and a singer-songwriter could have so much in common?"

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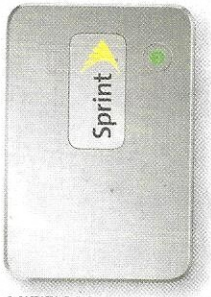

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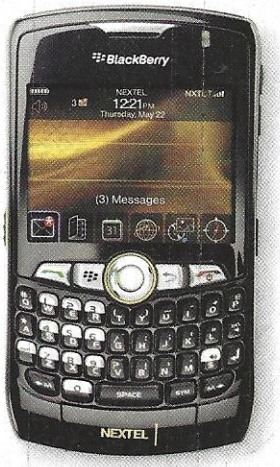

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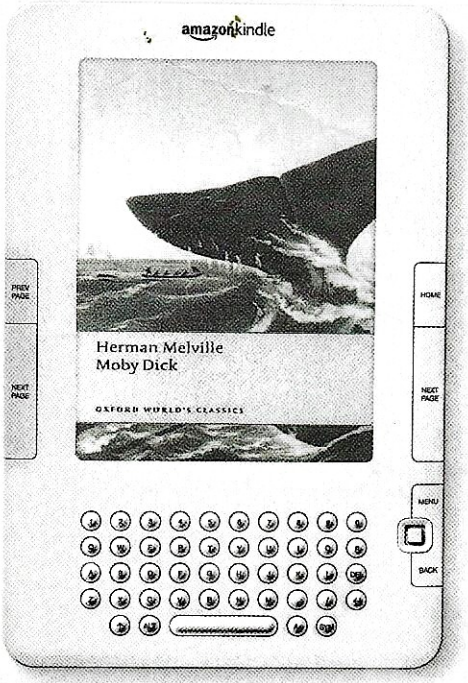

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FOCUS on driving

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The Canadian-based electro-pop duo **JUNIOR BOYS** take their musical cues from a wide variety of genres, old and new, to create a thoroughly modern sound that is distinctly their own. On a break from promoting their latest release *Begone Dull Care*, bandmates Jeremy Greenspan and Matt Didemus reveal their thoughts on touring, growing up in Ontario and the importance of showering.

WORDS TO ROCK BY

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR MUSICAL INFLUENCES?
JEREMY GREENSPAN: We listened to a lot of dance music when we were growing up. We were inspired by people doing Chicago House music and Detroit techno.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE GROWING UP IN HAMILTON, ONTARIO?
JEREMY: Hamilton is a pretty isolated city, a small industrial center -- very, very close to Toronto. So, you always have that sense of being the underdog. But it was good for me because it was such an un-hip place that you don't have to fit in, and you don't have to dress a certain way, or act in a certain way, and that's how I feel most comfortable.

HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE YOUR "SOUND" FOR THE UNINITIATED?
JEREMY: We wouldn't. One of the great joys of being a musician is that we don't have to classify ourselves, other people can.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR MOM WOULD SAY IS YOUR BEST QUALITY?
MATT DIDEMUS: My mom says my best quality is helping her with figuring out email.

DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL MANTRA/"WISDOM STATEMENT"?
JEREMY: We just sort of 'play it by ear', I suppose, maybe that's our mantra!

"WE DON'T HAVE TO CLASSIFY OURSELVES, OTHER PEOPLE CAN." – JEREMY

WHAT'S YOUR PRE-SHOW REGIMEN TO CALM POTENTIAL JITTERS?
JEREMY: I'm incredibly blessed considering that as a person I am a cesspool of neuroses, the one thing that I don't have is a tremendous amount of stage fright. I don't know why that is since all the coordinates are in place for me to be terrified on stage but for whatever reason I'm okay.

WHAT DOES PLAYING THE OUTDOOR FESTIVAL CIRCUIT MEAN FOR YOU?
MATT: It's great in certain ways. You get to play for many more people than you would in a club show but it can also be somewhat stressful for a band like us because we are a three- or four-piece band with an arsenal of equipment. There are so many elements of chance and so many things that can go wrong, and do go wrong.

WHAT'S THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS REQUEST THAT HAS BEEN ASKED OF YOU/YOUR BAND?
MATT: Last night, someone asked me to give him a free t-shirt because he said he accidentally set his room on fire, burned his closet down and didn't have his Junior Boys t-shirt anymore.

DID YOU GIVE HIM THE T-SHIRT?
MATT: Yeah I did. I felt bad.

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'VE LEARNED FROM LIFE ON THE ROAD?
JEREMY: Shower whenever you can wherever you can.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CONCERT EXPERIENCE – EITHER AS A PERFORMER OR FAN?

To find out Junior Boys' answer to this and other probing questions, go to ***rollingstone.com/Heineken.***

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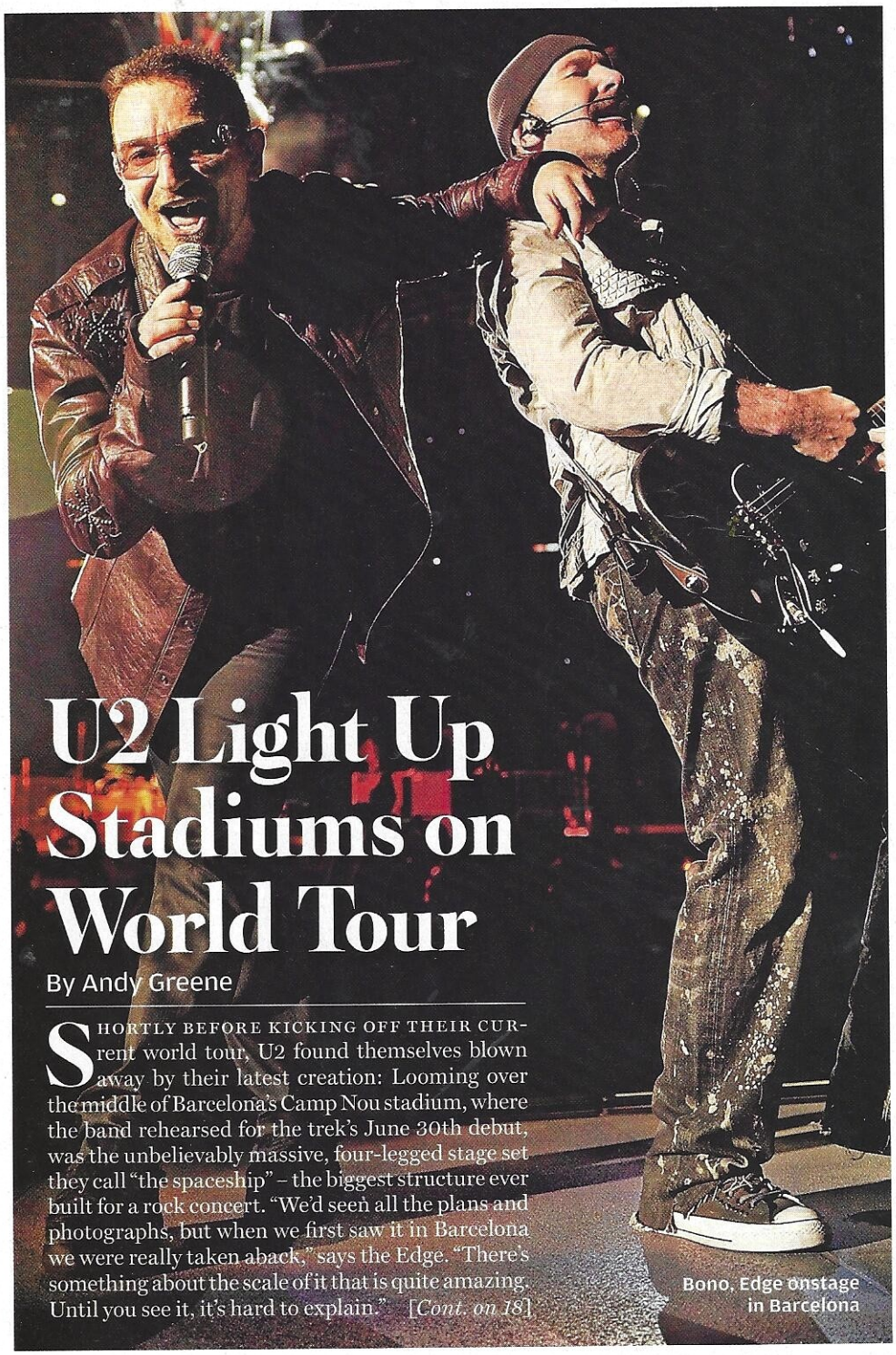
IN THE STUDIO: MGMT
Brooklyn duo rent a house in Malibu, craft experimental second disc. Page 19

SUPERGROUP ALERT!
Van Hagar meets the Chilis in Chickenfoot, rock's weirdest new band. Page 22

Q&A: KID ROCK
On monogamy, Twitter and rocking the country with Lynyrd Skynyrd. Page 24



KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE

U2 Light Up Stadiums on World Tour

By Andy Greene

SHORTLY BEFORE KICKING OFF THEIR CURrent world tour, U2 found themselves blown away by their latest creation: Looming over the middle of Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium, where the band rehearsed for the trek's June 30th debut, was the unbelievably massive, four-legged stage set they call "the spaceship" – the biggest structure ever built for a rock concert. "We'd seen all the plans and photographs, but when we first saw it in Barcelona we were really taken aback," says the Edge. "There's something about the scale of it that is quite amazing. Until you see it, it's hard to explain." [*Cont. on 18*]

Bono, Edge onstage in Barcelona

Hall of Fame to Celebrate 25 Years This Fall

Springsteen, U2, Clapton, more booked for New York blowout

By Brian Hiatt

WITH PERFORMances by U2, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Eric Clapton, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Metallica, Crosby, Stills, Nash and friends, plus many others, the Rock

PREVIEW

& Roll Hall of Fame will celebrate its 25th anniversary this fall with a pair of massive concerts that aim to do nothing less than trace the entire history of rock. "It's going to be the greatest gathering ever of rock & roll talent in one place at one time," says ROLLING STONE founder and editor Jann S. Wenner, the event's executive producer. "We're asking everyone to do something a little special, a little different, having them work with artists they may not have worked with before."

"It's been pure fun, assembling a live mixtape of these great artists, finding the personal connections between them," adds filmmaker and [*Cont. on 16*]

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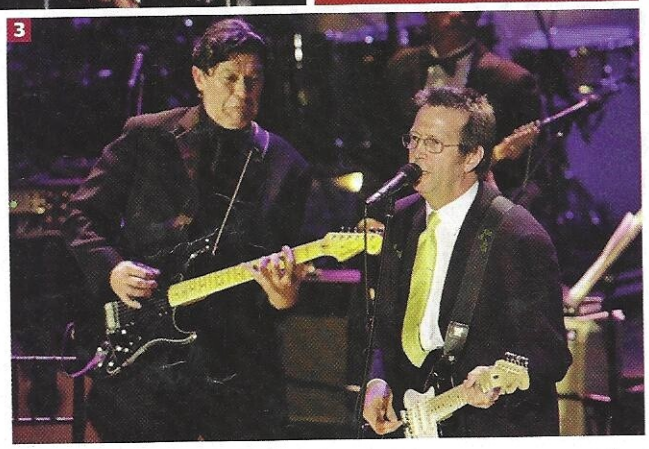
Killer Collaborations

(1) Springsteen (with Bob Dylan at a 1995 Hall of Fame concert) will headline Night One. **(2)** Franklin will lead a soul revue with Paul Shaffer's CBS Orchestra. **(3)** Robertson helped plan the shows, which will feature his friend Clapton.



[*Cont. from 13*] former ROLLING STONE staffer Cameron Crowe, a member of the creative committee planning the concerts, set for October 29th and 30th at New York's Madison Square Garden. "We want to have the show be as personal as the best moments from the Hall of Fame inductions, like Springsteen inducting Jackson Browne." Each show will have an entirely separate lineup, and the highlights of the two events will be edited together for an HBO telecast. Proceeds from the event will be used to establish a permanent endowment for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Between performances, short video clips will play – from vintage footage of, say, Chuck Berry, to newly produced segments that Crowe is helping to prepare. "The shows are going to have a loosely structured narrative," says Wenner. "Through these artists, we want to tell the story of rock & roll, to demonstrate the meaning and power of rock."

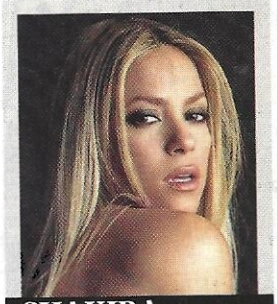
Each night will feature four headliners leading themed segments of the show, filled with guest stars linked to their influences. Crosby, Stills and Nash, for instance, will perform with various California-based artists; Metallica will lead a hard-rock segment; and Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin will each headline a soul revue, backed by Paul Shaffer and the CBS Orchestra. "The idea is to pay tribute to where rock & roll came from," says Shaffer. "Which, of course, was black music and rhythm & blues."

"This doesn't have to follow any rules that ever came before – except putting on an amazing show," says Robbie Robertson, another member of the committee. The concerts will likely be at least four and a half hours each. "It'll fly by," promises committee member and veteran event producer Joel Gallen. "I'd compare it to No Nukes in 1979, which was the same length – but since it had such an incredible lineup, it felt short."

The creative committee – which also includes Tom Hanks (who will likely make onstage appearances), his producing partner Gary Goetzman, Creative Artists Agency managing partner Rob Light, and Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Foundation CEO Joel Peresman – has been planning the shows for more than a year. "I just keep hammering what we don't want it to be, which is the same old shit, only a little different," says Robertson. "A lot of these shows are extremely boring, and they're a corny, showbizzy thing, and we don't have to do that. The feeling is that we can really do something with a more original spin on it and much more of a timeless quality."

Details of the shows are still taking shape, but expectations are high. "It will truly be the largest thing the Hall of Fame has ever done," says Peresman. "And it will be one of the more interesting live musical events that's ever happened."

HOT LIST



SHAKIRA

"She Wolf"

Sorry, Michael J. Fox – we've got a new favorite lycanthrope! And not only can she dunk a basketball, her badonkadonk is way less hairy. Shak's new jam is a bouncy electro-pop smoker about letting your inner wolf run free. *Aooo!*

ARCTIC MONKEYS

"Crying Lightning"

You know how people worry about Harry Potter growing up? That's how we felt about Brit wunderkind Alex Turner. But this tune, a superfuzz freakout produced by Josh Homme, set our minds at ease.

SPOON

"Got Nuffin"

If you want that chick with giant glasses to get down at your next party, put this on: It's all hypnotic bass, spazzed-out guitar and deadpan lyrics about having "nothing to lose."

ATTACK ATTACK!

"Stick Stickly" video

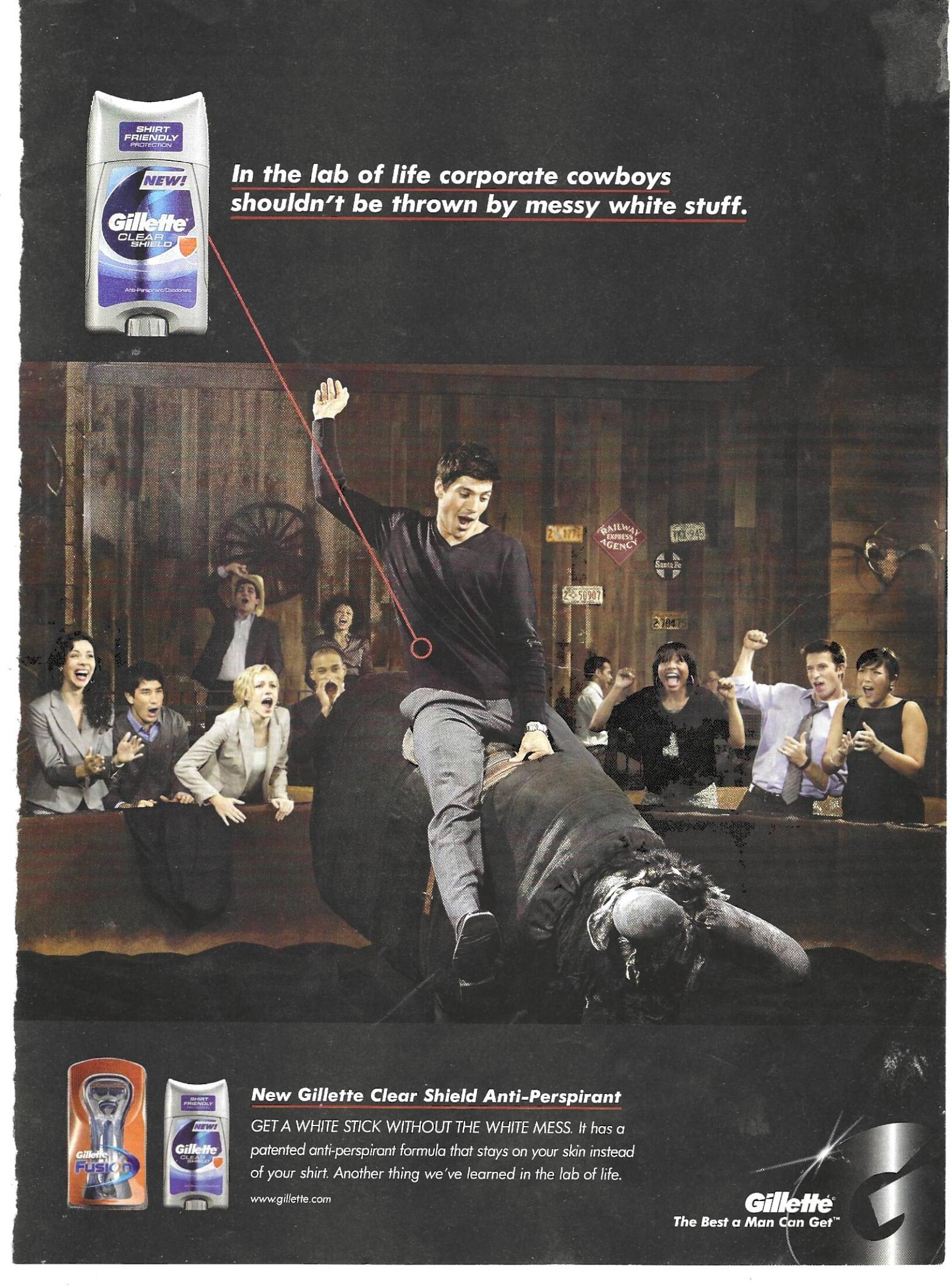
Worst music ever or the future of rock? This Warped crew's clip showcases a whole new genre: crabcore, named for the lowriding pose from which they rock out. It's the demon spawn of emo, DJ Tiësto and black metal.

MAINO

"Million Bucks"

Crooklyn MC Maino offers his own stimulus package: Over a Stallone-worthy beat, he imagines giving away stacks of cash, buying his friends drinks and shopping till he drops. Yo, Geithner – hire this dude!

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NEAL PRESTON/CORBIS; DAVID ATLAS/RETNA; JAIME DE LA IGUANA; STAN HONDA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES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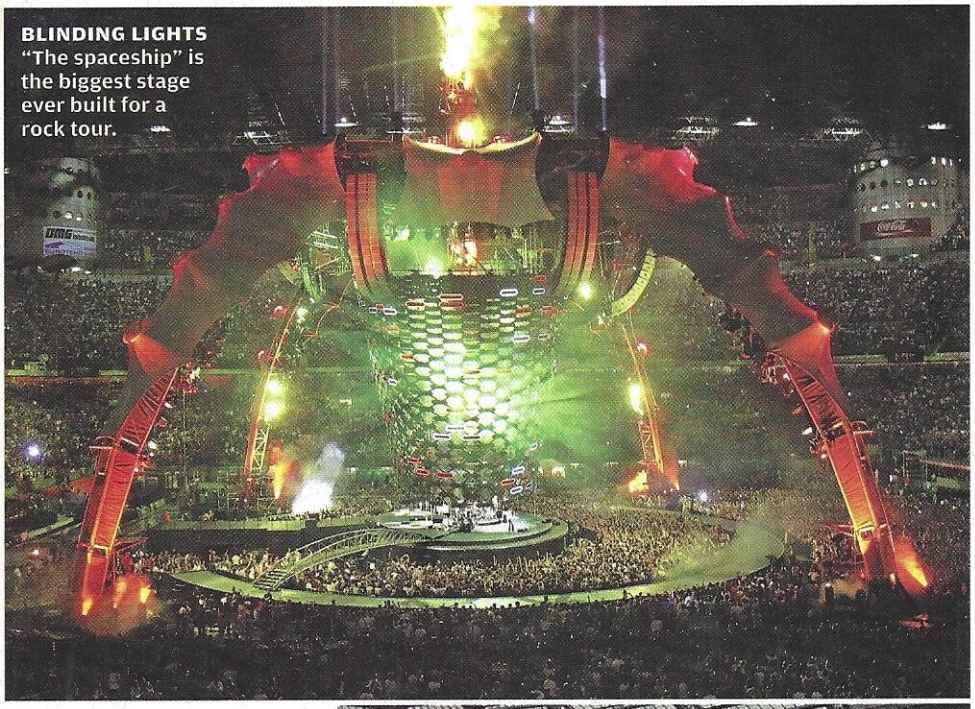
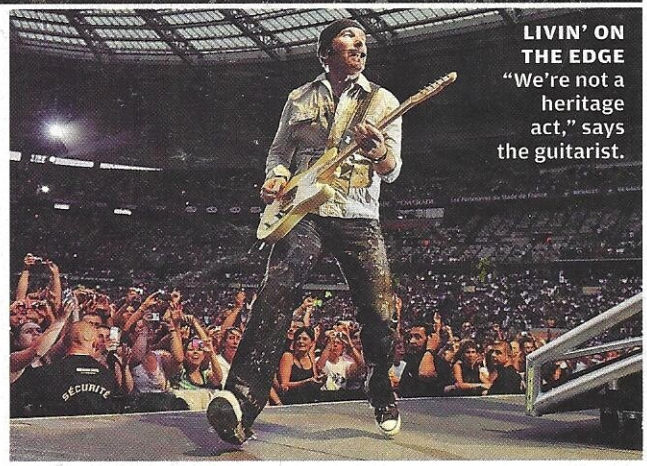


BLINDING LIGHTS "The spaceship" is the biggest stage ever built for a rock tour.

[*Cont. from 13*] Several days later, with 90,000 intense Spanish fans filling the stadium on a hot night, David Bowie's "Space Oddity" blares from the giant PA as a red light pulses within the center of the huge set. Suddenly, a spotlit Larry Mullen Jr. appears, pounding out a complex polyrhythm with the Edge's guitars ringing out into the night. As on each of the tour's seven stops so far, the opening jam resolves into an anthemic take on "Breathe," the first of four straight songs from U2's new *No Line on the Horizon* that open the show. "We want to establish that this show was really about this moment in time in art and music and history," says the Edge. "We're not a heritage act."

After two consecutive scaled-back tours – at least by U2 standards – the band has returned to the overwhelming visual assault that defined its 1990s Zoo TV and PopMart treks. Set designer Willie Williams spent months creating the spaceship, which allows for unobstructed views from all seats in a stadium. "Obviously people have played in the round before," Williams says. "But the structure never really had any aesthetic. My big breakthrough was realizing that we should make it so big that it essentially becomes part of the building."



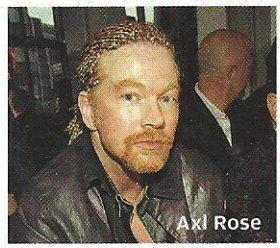
LIVIN' ON THE EDGE "We're not a heritage act," says the guitarist.

After opening with the *No Line* tunes, U2 have been cranking out a miniset of some of their biggest hits – "Beautiful Day" goes into "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" and "Desire." "There isn't one song we *have* to play," says the Edge. "But there's probably a group of 10 songs that we really ought to." At the end of "Angel of Harlem," Bono has been working in bits of Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror" and "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough." "That was very much a spontaneous thing from the opening night," says the Edge. "His death left us with more questions than answers, but we couldn't help but reference it in the show."

"Something about the scale of the stage is quite amazing," says the Edge.

The European leg runs through August 22nd; after a short break, the six-week American leg kicks off on September 12th at Chicago's Soldier Field. No further dates are booked, but the tour will eventually span the globe and last at least a year. "It's hard to know exactly when we're going to stop," says the Edge. "It will be a case of us having a meeting early next year and figuring out if there's a natural limit. We could just keep going for a very long time, but from a creative standpoint there's a lot of unfinished business to attend to as far as songwriting and the recording of albums are concerned. We don't want to leave it going too long."

IN THE NEWS



Axl Rose

Guns n' Roses Leaker Sentenced

California blogger Kevin Cogill, who was arrested in 2008 for posting tracks from **Guns n' Roses'** *Chinese Democracy* last June, five months before its release, was sentenced to one year of probation, including two months of home confinement. He was also ordered to record a public-service announcement about piracy for the Recording Industry Association of America. "I was relieved there was no jail time," Cogill told ROLLING STONE. "As far as the PSA, I do not intend to be an anti-P2P poster boy. I think sharing is good, but I respect artists' rights as well."

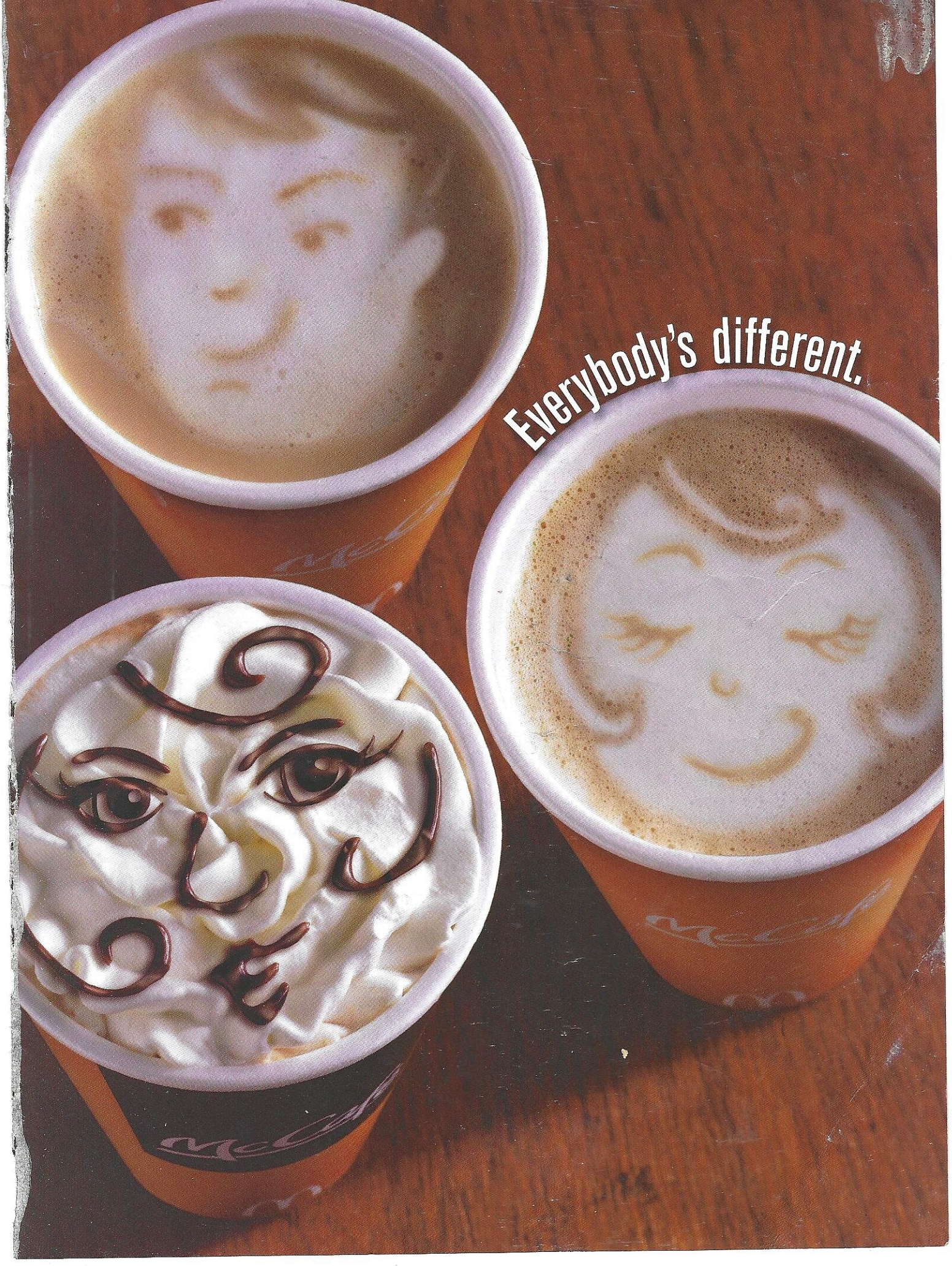
Aerosmith Tour Limps On

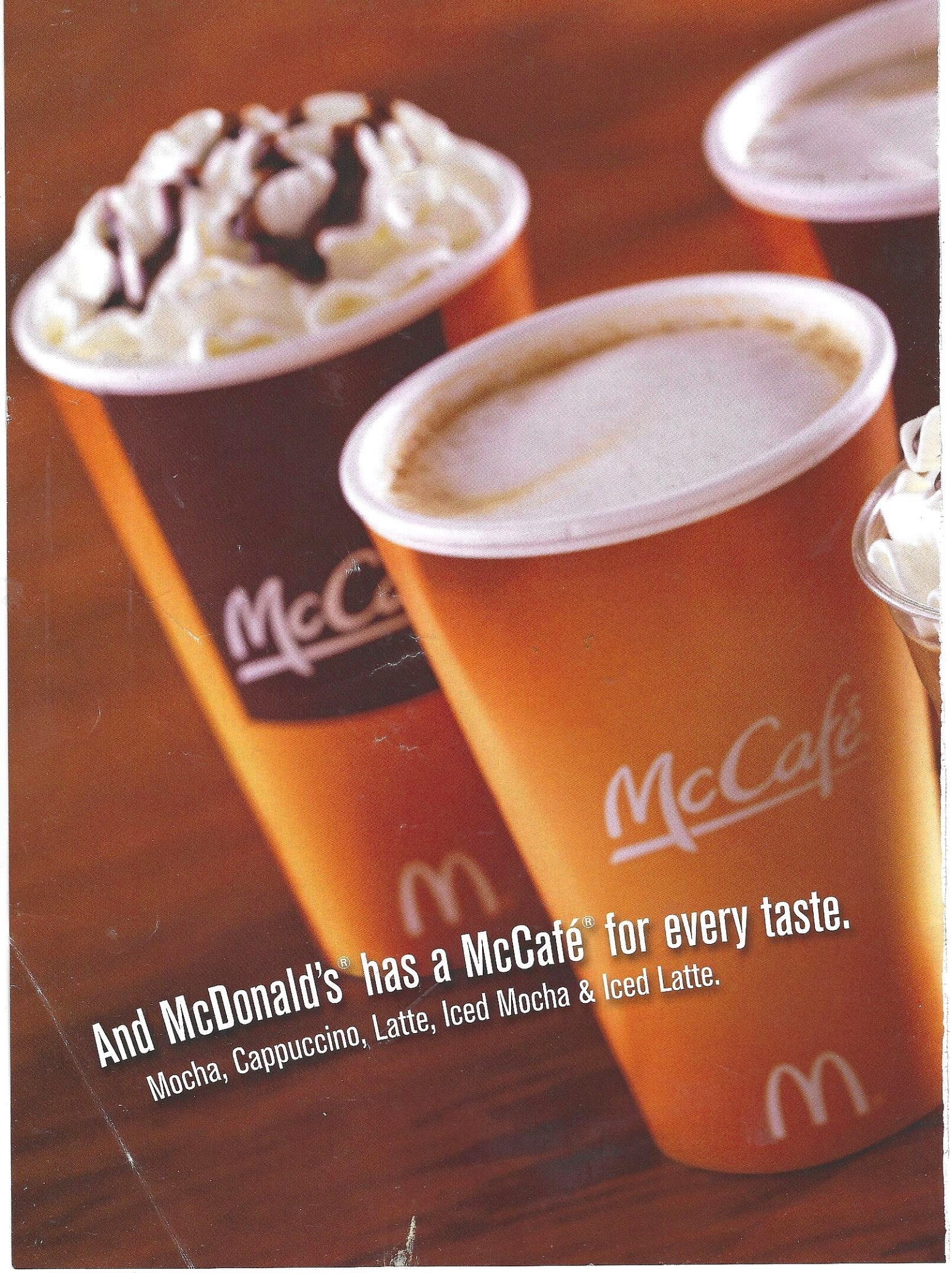
Aerosmith's injury-plagued summer tour has claimed another victim. Bassist **Tom Hamilton** will miss an indefinite number of dates after undergoing "noninvasive surgery," according to a press release. **Steven Tyler** suffered a leg injury in June, causing the group to postpone seven shows, and rhythm guitarist **Brad Whitford** missed a month of gigs after sustaining an injury from banging his head while exiting his Ferrari. "We've been abusing these bodies for a long time," guitarist **Joe Perry** (who had a knee replaced in 2008) told ROLLING STONE earlier this year. "It's bound to, you know, show up after a while."

Panic! at the Disco Downsize

Guitarist-songwriter **Ryan Ross** and bassist **Jon Walker** have left **Panic! at the Disco**. The pair – who announced the split on the band's website – are starting their own group, while singer **Brendon Urie** and drummer **Spencer Smith** will continue as PATD. (They will be opening for Blink-182 in August.) "We've creatively evolved in different directions," they said in a statement. "Parting ways is truly what is best for each of us."

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: FREDERIC NEBINGER/ABACA USA; REX USA; KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE


Everybody's different.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GOLDEN STATE For the follow-up to their 2008 debut, Goldwasser (left) and Vanwyngarden have decamped to a Malibu mansion to work with Sonic Boom, from Eighties U.K. shoegaze act Spacemen 3.

MGMT's California Dream: Duo Get Experimental on Second LP

Psych rockers camp out in Malibu with vintage synths and touring band

By Ben Popper

IT'S DUSK, AND A VINTAGE organ sends echoes bouncing around the Malibu mansion where Brooklyn psych rockers MGMT are working on their second album. Singer Andrew Vanwyngarden is exhausted after hours of rehearsal. "Let's run through that one more time," he says. Ben Goldwasser, the other half of the group, is sitting behind the organ. "Stay up late enough," he says, "and you'll begin destroying sound, not making it."

Album Congratulations
Due Out Early 2010

The band members break into laughter, and they launch into "Congratulations," a slinky, self-deprecating paean to fame. "But I've got someone to make reports," sings Vanwyngarden over a country-soul tune, "that tell me how my money's spent/To book my stays and draw my blinds/So I can't tell what's really there/And all I need's a great big congratulations."

The band's 2008 breakthrough, *Oracular Spectacular*, used material written by the pair dating back to 2001, when they started the group as undergrads. For *Congratulations*, the full touring band is working through the new tracks while Vanwyngarden and Goldwasser are still writing them. After touring for more than a year, the pair are trying to rein in the wilder, jammier sound of their live shows. "These guys are part of the band now, and it wouldn't feel right without them," says Vanwyngarden, "but I want the vibe on the record to be way tighter."

The band has brought in British producer Sonic Boom, a.k.a. Pete Kember, of shoegaze act Spacemen 3. "They want me around because I'll tell the rest of the band to shut up," Kember jokes. He's also bringing more of an experimental bent to the album, which draws from MGMT favorites Royal Trux, oddball producer Joe Meek, and Echo and the Bunnymen. "He's like a demented camp counselor," says Vanwyngarden of Kember. "He encourages the weird ideas we would normally abandon."

A whiteboard in the dining room lists tracks in progress: "Flash Delirium" flips between a bluesy strut and a samba-style beat; "It's Working" features a freaky organ line and the hook "It's working in your blood!"; and "Song for Dan Treacy" is a meditation on the lead singer of the cult U.K. post-punk act Television Personalities. That track – built around a deranged keyboard line and twangy acoustic guitar – is one of eight or nine songs the pair have sketched out, with hopes of finishing the record by year's end. After leaving Malibu in June, they plan to polish off the album at a soon-to-be-built home studio in Brooklyn and then head to mix the album with the Flaming Lips' Dave Fridmann.

Though the group members are excited about what they've accomplished in the past two years – MGMT have collaborated with Beck, been covered by Weezer and worked on a track for Jay-Z's upcoming *Blueprint 3* – they are still anxious about the follow-up. Says Goldwasser, "We have to keep pushing for sounds that are one step ahead of the pack."

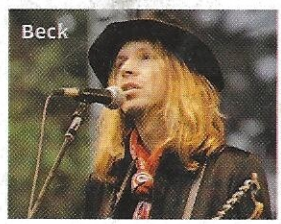
Photograph by JOSH CHEUSE

JEFF KRAVITZ/FILMMAGIC (BECK)

STUDIO NOTES

Beck Covers Classic LPs

Beck is teaming up with MGMT, producer Nigel Godrich and Devendra Banhart for *Record Club*, a new project where the singer and his friends will cover a classic album in a single day and then post a song a week for free on Beck.com. "There's something liberating about doing it in just one day," Beck says. "It doesn't give you a chance to overthink things." For the first album, Beck and his crew tackled *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. "It's a formative record for me," says Beck. "As a kid, it turns something on in your head and gives you the idea that you might want to do something like that someday." The next album has already been recorded – but Beck's mum on the title. "Nigel was strongly lobbying for us to do Digital Underground's *Sex Packets*," he says. "That's probably something we'll do down the line." ANDY GREENE



Colbie Caillat

Album Breakthrough
Due Out August 25th

For the follow-up to her smash 2007 debut, SoCal singer-songwriter Caillat enlisted the help of a famous producer: her dad. "He has so many ideas that I'd never come up with," she says of Ken Caillat, who co-produced Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*. "He put a [Coldplay's] *Viva la Vida*-style drumbeat on my song 'I Won't.' It's so cool." Her first single, the smooth, Seventies-ish "Fallin' for You," is based on an actual date Caillat went on. "I'm debating whether I should call and tell the guy that it's about him," she says. Caillat honed the disc's mellow acoustic vibe in Hawaii, where she rented a house on Kauai's Hanalei Bay with songwriter Kara DioGuardi last year. "We'd go out boogie-boarding and then come back and write songs," she says. "It was very productive." NICOLE FREHSÉE

Beatles, Stones Manager Dies at 77

Remembering Allen Klein, rock's most controversial deal-maker

By David Browne

Klein with Ono and Lennon in 1977. He was the subject of Lennon's "Steel and Glass" and the Who's "Who Are You."

ALLEN KLEIN – THE controversial, colorful manager of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Kinks and many others – died in New York on July 4th of Alzheimer's disease. He was 77. Klein made a name for himself negotiating unprecedented lucrative contracts for some of rock's biggest acts. The musical loves of his life were his clients Sam Cooke and Phil Spector – it was through Klein that Spector ended up producing the Beatles' *Let It Be*. Klein's music-publishing company, ABKCO, was worth as much as $100 million at the time of his death, according to a music-industry source.

In early 1969, the Beatles and their company Apple Corps were heading toward bankruptcy, and Klein, a New Jersey accountant then managing the Rolling Stones, knew it. At a meeting with John Lennon and Yoko Ono at a London hotel, Klein – a portly, blunt, steak-loving American – ordered macrobiotic rice and impressed Lennon by knowing which Beatles songs he had written. "That was the clincher," Ono says. "John signed the one-page contract prepared by Allen that afternoon."

But Klein's contracts with bands typically gave ABKCO at least partial ownership of artists' music, a situation many of his clients eventually came to feel was exploitative. Pete Townshend referred to Klein as "the awesome rock-leech godfather." Mick Jagger chased Klein down the hallway of a London hotel screaming, "Where's my fucking money?" Klein was the subject of a number of scathing songs by former clients. "Yes, there were lawsuits," says Klein's son, Jody Klein, who currently runs ABKCO. "But on the balance, you gotta go, 'Tell me about the bank accounts. Did Sam Cooke sell more records? Yes. Did the Rolling Stones have more success? Yes.' It happened too many times for it to be a fluke."

> **"The Beatles wanted stability, and Klein started being the daddy they wanted."**

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1931, Klein, working with college friend Don Kirshner – then a rising song publisher – made a name for himself by auditing labels and recouping money owed to artists. After finding $110,000 in unpaid royalties for Cooke, Klein renegotiated his contract with RCA, landing Cooke a $450,000 advance.

Klein was driven by a love of pop music and a blue-collar disdain for the upper class. His mother died when Klein was nine months old, and his father sent him to an orphanage when he was four. "It was him wanting to make it so bad to prove to himself he wasn't just that terrible tag, an 'orphan,'" says Kirshner. "To him, the underdog was the songwriter, the artist and the producer, and he didn't want the record companies getting all the spoils."

By 1964, Klein had latched on to the exploding British Invasion scene, negotiating deals for bands including the Kinks, Herman's Hermits and the Dave Clark Five. Klein renegotiated the Stones' contract with Decca, netting them over $1 million. "None of us were prepared to deal with the Stones in America," says their original co-manager Andrew Loog Oldham. "Allen was." By 1968, Klein had bought out Oldham's interest in the band's recordings and became the Stones' manager.

After becoming the Beatles' business manager in 1969, Klein renegotiated the band's EMI contract, resulting in the highest royalty rate at the time (58 cents per record). He also cleaned house at Apple, much to the dismay of its employees. "This was now 'OK, it's all about money and turning this into a real business,'" says former Apple employee Richard DiLello. "The Beatles wanted some stability, and Klein started being the daddy they really wanted, or thought they wanted and needed."

Yet falling-outs between Klein and his acts always seemed to come too. By 1970, the Stones had fired him (the band alleged that, among other things, he had placed its advance cash in his own company's account). Lennon, George Harrison and Ringo Starr did not renew their individual contracts with him in 1973. (McCartney's dislike of Klein is one of the factors that resulted in the Beatles' split.) In 1979, Klein spent two months in jail after being found guilty of filing a false tax return.

By the time of his death, ABKCO (the Allen and Betty Klein Company, named after Klein and his wife) owned or co-owned 10,000 master recordings and more than 2,000 song-publishing copyrights by many of his former clients – including every pre-1970 song by the Rolling Stones and an interest in around 130 Townshend tunes. Says Ono, "He was the last of the producers in rock & roll who had a flair to match the legendary big guys of old Hollywood." RS

Ali Akbar Khan 1922-2009

Ali Akbar Khan, 87, a giant of Indian classical music, who played at George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh in 1971, died of kidney failure on June 18th. Khan was the king of the sarod, the fretless, 25-string instrument. "It was like hearing Ray Charles had died," says Allman Brothers guitarist Derek Trucks. Khan made his American debut in 1955 and, in 1967, started the Ali Akbar College of Music, initially in Berkeley and then in San Rafael, California. (The Grateful Dead's Mickey Hart studied at both.) "He left a major imprint on thousands of musicians," says Hart. "Jerry [Garcia] loved him." Khan's work lives on in nearly 100 albums, as well as in his scores to films like Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*. "A lot of subtle things he would do, like nuanced bends and microtones, became something I incorporate all the time without even knowing it," says Trucks. "And that's from listening to thousands of hours of his records. He was a huge inspiration." D.B.

Sky Saxon 1937-2009

Sky Saxon, lead singer of the Los Angeles proto-punk group the Seeds, who scored a Top 40 hit in 1967 with the garage-rock anthem "Pushin' Too Hard," died of heart failure on June 25th. He was 71. "Sky was a complete free spirit, in the truest sense of the word," says Billy Corgan, who had recently recorded new songs with Saxon. "In a weird way, he was Iggy Pop before Iggy Pop." ANDY GREENE

FROM TOP: © BOB GRUEN; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES, 2

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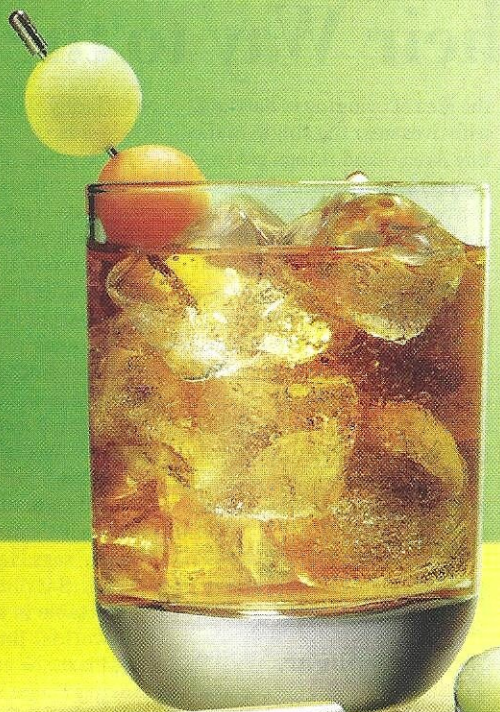

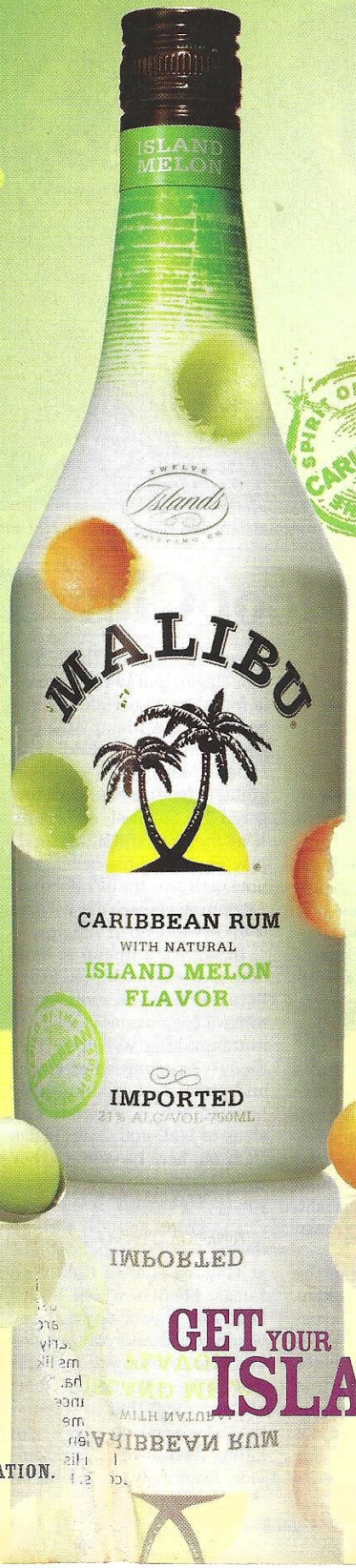

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BAND OF BROS Smith, Anthony, Satriani and Hagar (from left) came together at jam sessions at Hagar's Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, club.

Chickenfoot Claw Their Way to the Top

Members of Van Halen, Chili Peppers team up for year's unlikeliest hit

By Brian Hiatt

CHECKING IN

As a security guard opens the side door of New York's Irving Plaza to reveal a sweaty gaggle of professional autograph hounds, Red Hot Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith sees a chance to mess with his band's lead singer. "Look, it's Sammy Hagar – get him!" yells Smith, whose resemblance to Will Ferrell turns out to extend to his temperament. The drummer and two of his bandmates sprint safely to a waiting van as the crowd swarms the bemused frontman – who is, indeed, Sammy Hagar, thick blond curls, baggy Cabo Wabo tee and all.

It's the second week of the first-ever tour by Chickenfoot, the least likely rock success story of the year. They've swiftly graduated from clubs to amphitheaters, and their first album, *Chickenfoot*, debuted at Number Four in June and is still lingering in the Top 30. The results are not too shabby for a semi-supergroup that's half Van Hagar, half WTF: On bass is founding Van Halen member Michael Anthony – the guy who was replaced by Eddie Van Halen's teenage kid – and on guitar is baldheaded, fleet-fingered Joe Satriani, of *Surfing With the Alien* and suing-Coldplay fame. (As his colleagues note with awe, the ultrafocused Satriani starts each day with six shots of espresso in one cup.)

In all, it's a lineup so random that you're tempted to believe the band's facetious claim to have been assembled by the matchmaking website eHarmony – especially when Hagar and Smith start spontaneously harmonizing on obscene versions of Hall and Oates songs ("Oh-oh, here he comes," they sing. "Watch out, girls, he'll lick you up/He's an ass cleaner").

The group actually formed during tequila-drenched jams at Hagar's club in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, where Smith (who has a place down there) would periodically play Led Zep and Montrose songs with Hagar and Anthony. For no particular reason except that they found the name amusing, they began billing themselves as Chickenfoot. Eventually, Hagar hit on the idea of bringing in Satriani, who lives near the singer in the Bay Area – and things got (relatively) serious. Their debut, recorded at George Lucas' Skywalker Sound outside San Francisco, reveals Chickenfoot as a bluesy Death Star of a band, with lethal instrumental firepower that old-school hard-rock fans aren't finding much of elsewhere – plus the unmistakable "Why Can't This Be Love" sound of Hagar and Anthony's vocal harmonies. There was one contemporary influence on the record: the Black Keys' *Attack & Release*, which Hagar played for Satriani to push him toward raw rock riffs.

> **"This is the strangest group of people ever assembled," says Sammy Hagar.**

In Chickenfoot, Smith abandons the restraint of his groove-centric Peppers playing, letting loose with constant, wild fills (maybe too wild: he tore a bicep at a European show). And Anthony, who was relegated to playing thumping root notes in Van Halen, breaks out flashy John Entwistle-style leads.

In contrast, Satriani – who spent his career as a solo instrumentalist – has to pick his spots, which only makes his Hendrixian outbursts more jaw-dropping. Despite his caffeine intake and apparent litigiousness, Satriani comes across as a gentle soul – he's both the band's musical linchpin and something of the group nerd: He opens a road case to display the fat science-fiction novel he's looking forward to reading in Europe. "We're a little rambunctious for Joseph," says Hagar.

Still, Satriani is growing comfortable in his bandmates' odd worlds. Backstage at Irving Plaza, he ends up accompanying Hagar's friend, celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse, as the Food Network star belts out a self-penned blues tune. Another one of Hagar's chef pals, Mario Batali, shakes his head as he listens. "Man, that's Joe Satriani right there," says Batali. "I'm jaded, but not that jaded." Soon, Whoopi Goldberg shows up too, and everybody poses for a group photo. Hagar looks proud. "This," he says, "is the strangest group of people ever assembled."

LEANN MUELLER

WHAT NIGHTMARES ARE MADE OF
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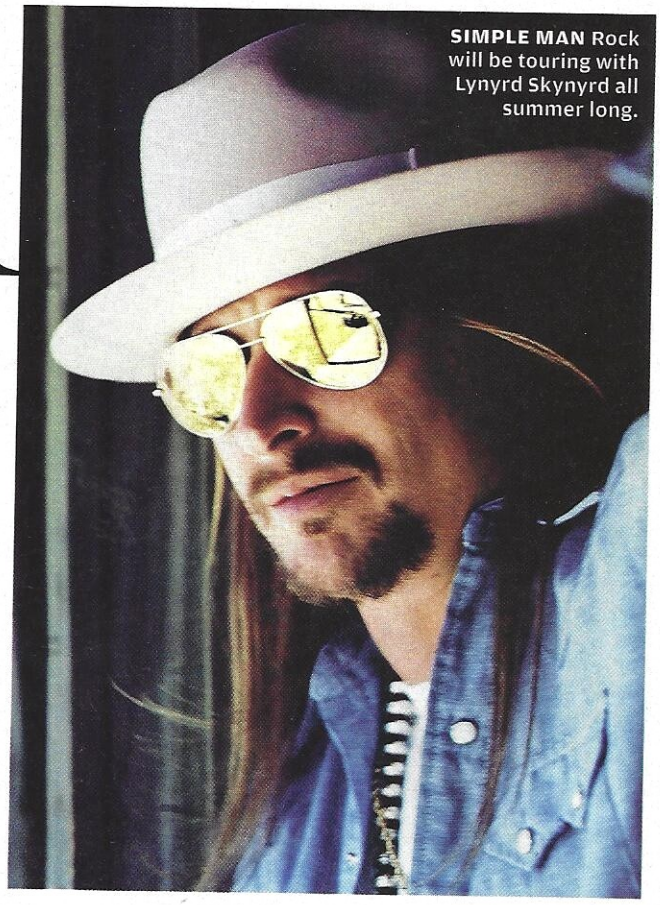
Q&A

On the strange ways of white people, and why he'll never Twitter

By Austin Scaggs



SIMPLE MAN Rock will be touring with Lynyrd Skynyrd all summer long.

Kid Rock

"This jacked-up F-150 passed us the other day with a big Kid Rock sticker. That says, 'I'm an American.'"

"IT'S FUCKING HOT AS hell in Texas," says Kid Rock, checking in from his tour bus in Dallas. On a day off from his summer tour of amphitheaters with Lynyrd Skynyrd, Rock plans to work in his mobile studio, honing tracks for his upcoming album, tentatively scheduled for the end of this year. The follow-up to 2007's career-rejuvenating 3-million-selling *Rock N Roll Jesus,* the new album (produced by Rick Rubin) will include topical songs that touch on the plights of Michigan autoworkers and Midwestern farmers. "I always write about what's close to me," Rock says. "When I'm at my house in Malibu, I don't even realize there's another world. But when I'm at home in Clarkston, Michigan, I see the pain around me."

What's the difference between this year's Kid Rock extravaganza and last summer's tour?

Last year it was very stripped-down, and we proved to ourselves that the songs can stand alone. So this time we brought back the pyro and big lighting, I've been in the parking lots filming video all summer long, and it looks like a fucking NASCAR race out there. We were driving around the other day, and this jacked-up F-150 passes us with a big Kid Rock sticker, and I'm like, "Now that says 'I'm a fucking American' right there."

Why did you decide to bring Lynyrd Skynyrd back out?

It's just a great bill. My buddy came backstage and said, "Fuck, I forgot how many great songs they have. Those fuckers are like the redneck Eagles."

As a kid, what big summer shows did you attend?

When I was a teenager, I mostly went to hip-hop concerts, where people were always fighting, taking each other's chains and smoking dope. But my dad took me and Uncle Kracker to see Howard Jones and Tears for Fears. I was like, "Look at all these fucking white people. This is incredible, they're all so well-behaved! People actually sit in the seats here!" And I went to the first Lollapalooza. That was nutty. Great lineup – Nine Inch Nails and Ice-T – but I always wanted to be onstage: "Why the fuck am I walking around here? I should be on the fucking stage!"

On tour, what time does happy hour start?

After the show – basically at 11:00. I started that a few years ago, because some nights you're just having a couple of drinks before the show, and the next thing you know you're shitfaced and have to go on. And it's no fun trying to play shitfaced.

Is there a drink waiting on the side of the stage for you?

I'll slam a Gatorade, take a shower, and I'll mix a Jim Beam and Diet Coke. Once I was playing at Lafitte's, the great old bar in New Orleans, and I was so fucked up, just playing piano in the back lounge. The next night I came in, and the bartender was like, "Holy shit, I can't believe you're back here." "Why?" "Dude, you drank 18 Beam and Cokes!"

I understand you're going to sell your own beer, brewed right in Michigan.

Yeah, it's going to be called Badass Beer. I thought we'd just be making beer and having fun, like, "Ah, we'll get free beer, and it will have my name on it." But it's mind-blowing. We have fuckloads of orders, and no one's even tasted it yet.

Did you ever go to summer camp?

My parents went on a trip to Europe and sent me to this camp in northern Michigan when I was 12 or so. It was on a lake, and you could go horseback riding. It sucked, and I wanted to go home. There was this horrible fucking initiation where they put you on a counselor's shoulders and walked up a cliff, threatening to throw you into the river, and kids would scream bloody murder. But I was the only white kid there. It was all Mexican kids who'd come up from Mexico. And they'd try to get into altercations with me, but they left me alone, because I could do the moonwalk. They said, "He's fuckin' badass! He can do the moonwalk!"

I imagine you were a big fan of "Beat It."

Eddie Van Halen's guitar playing on it is fucking sweet. I was obsessed with the 808 drum machine when I was a little kid. Of course, that's the sound that starts "Beat It" and Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing." I'd go to the Music Box music store in Michigan and ask them to let me play with the 808.

What do you think about celebrity Twitters?

It's gay. If one more person asks me if I have a Twitter, I'm going to tell them, "Twitter this dick, motherfucker." I don't have anything to say, and what I have to say is not that relevant. Anything that is relevant, I'm going to bottle it up and then squeeze it onto a record somewhere.

When you're out on a boat in the summer, what do you like to play?

Anything that's feel-good music: Seger, Tom Petty or maybe Zach Brown, to keep it relevant.

What are your favorite lines from the upcoming album?

There's a fun new song called "One Woman Man."

What! A song about monogamy?

No, the line is "When God made me, he did not make a one-woman man." RS

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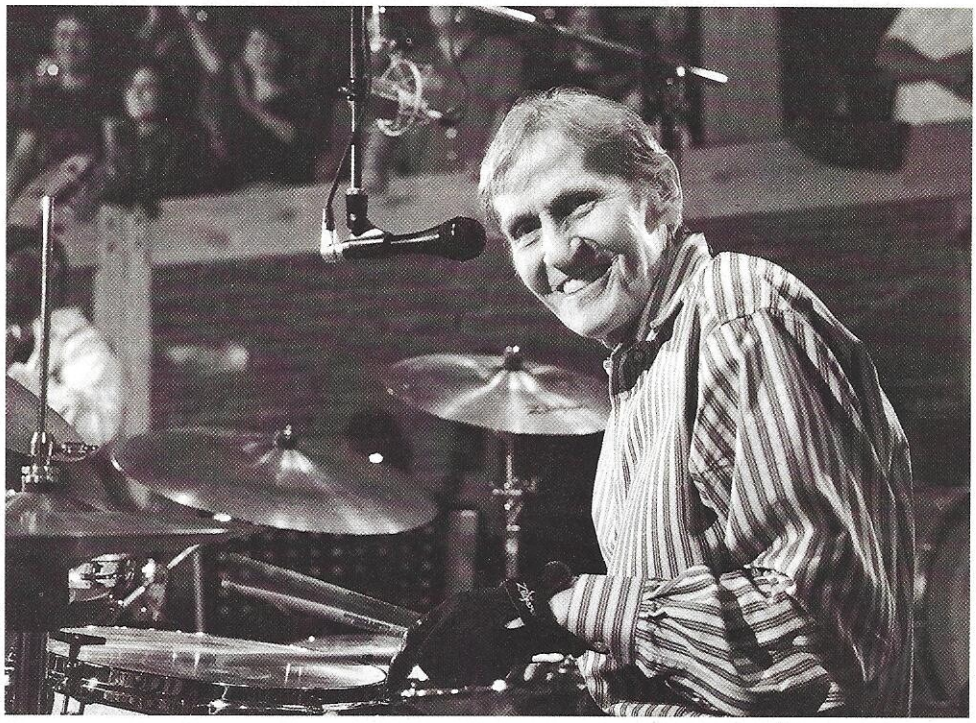
Up All Night With Levon Helm

The drummer parties in his Woodstock barn, crafts best LP in decades

By Austin Scaggs



MR. SATURDAY NIGHT Levon Helm, at a Midnight Ramble in April, hosted his first one in 2004.

AFTER A NEARLY THREE-hour journey through American roots music – highlighted by a little Dylan, a little Dead and a handful of Band classics – Levon Helm takes a final bow and disappears down a dark hallway. It's past 1 a.m., and the 150th Midnight Ramble is over. Helm lives and plays nearly every Saturday night here at his barn in the woods, just about two miles from the center of Woodstock, New York. Down a corridor, the musicians hang out as Helm sits at his kitchen table and unloads the contents of a leather pouch: scissors, Zig-Zag rolling papers and a half-ounce of quality buds. Helm dabs his sweaty forehead with a towel that hangs around his neck and begins cutting up enough weed for a thick joint. Surrounding him are photos from his musical career, which has spanned six decades. "There's some history in that kitchen," says his daughter Amy Helm, who often sings with him. "After every Ramble, they hold court. Dad likes to call it the Cannabis Cup, and it's like Cheech and Chong back there. You have to get out quick if you don't want a contact high."

Eleven years after being diagnosed with throat cancer, Helm, 69, has made a surprising comeback: At his worst, nearly 30 radiation treatments reduced that high, lonesome and singular wail that graced some of the Band's greatest songs – "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," "Up on Cripple Creek" and "The Weight," to name a few – to less than a whisper. But with time and attention, it is back in top form. "All I know for sure is that I can do what I used to be able to do," says Helm, taking a puff. "I always took it for granted: 'If we don't get it tonight, we'll get it tomorrow night' – but the difference now is that I don't miss a night anymore. I want every night to be as much fun as possible, with the least amount of hassle and no regrets."

The relaxed vibe of the Midnight Ramble – and the return of Helm's vocal cords – have inspired him to begin recording again. Last year, Helm's first album in more than 25 years, a mostly acoustic set of country hymns and traditional folk tunes called *Dirt Farmer*, took home a Grammy. "We thought, 'Let's just get together and record some of these old tunes that Levon grew up with,'" says guitarist Larry Campbell, who co-produced the record and has been playing with Helm since he left Bob Dylan's band in 2004. "There was no clock, there was no budget. About halfway into it we all started to realize there was *something* there. And the story about Levon losing his voice, and the voice coming back, singing songs that represented his roots – that's pretty heavy stuff."

In June, Helm released *Electric Dirt*, which explores gospel in the Staple Singers' "Move Along Train," two of Muddy Waters' classic blues, Randy Newman's "Kingfish" and the feel-good Grateful Dead romp "Tennessee Jed." "This go-round has been a lot more fun," says Helm. "Now I know I've got enough voice left to do it."

The Midnight Ramble is Helm's idea of a perfect house party: old-time music playing late into the night, studio-quality acoustics and a rapt audience, many of whom arrive bearing casseroles for the potluck dinner. There is an appealing intimacy at the barn; from the best seats one can literally reach out and touch Helm's ride cymbal. "He had been dreaming and scheming this for a couple of decades before he set it in motion," says Amy Helm. "From the beginning he knew it was going to be unique."

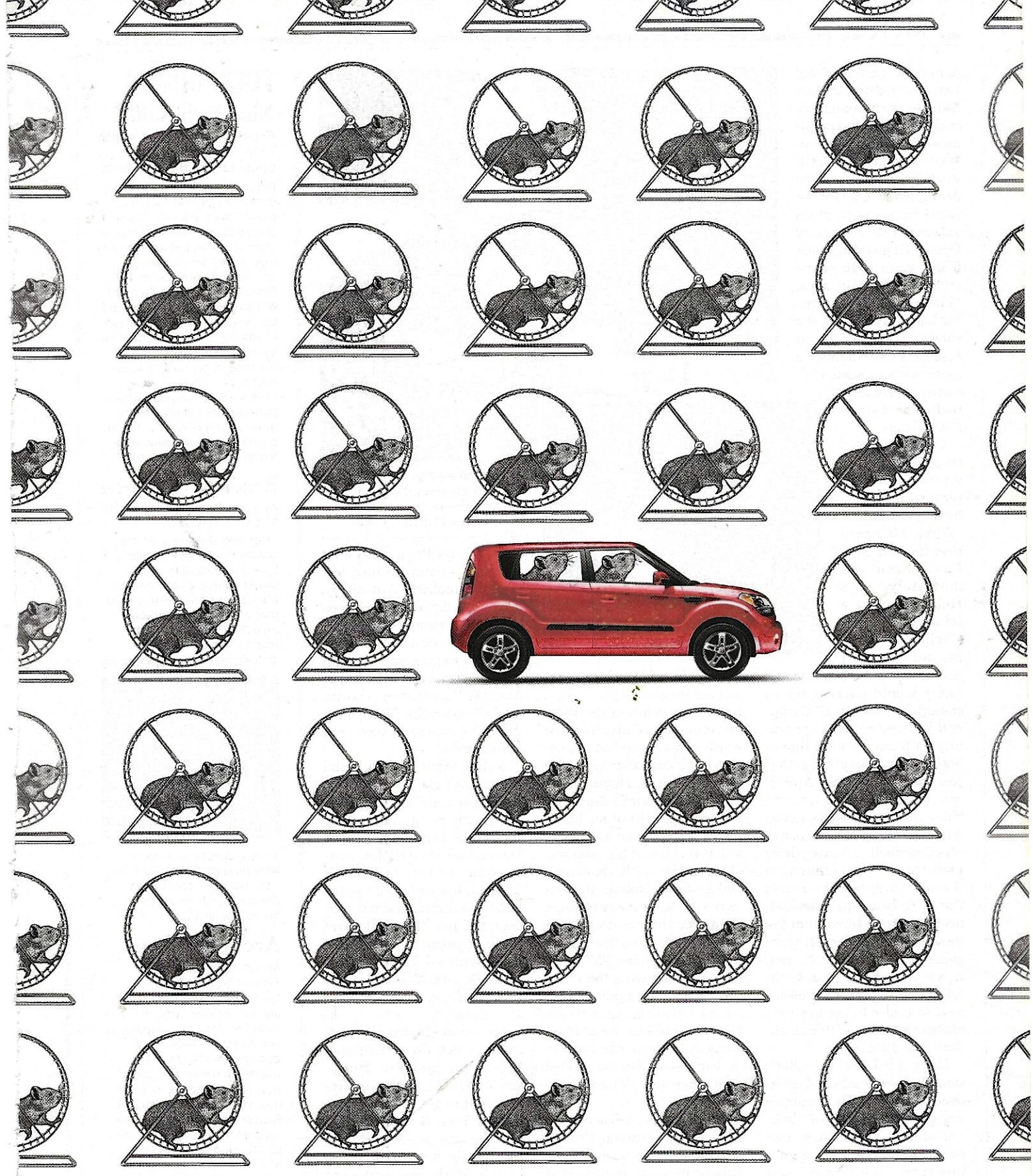
"I want every night to be as much fun as possible – no hassle and no regrets."

In fact, the seed for the weekly party was planted way back in the 1940s, when Levon was growing up on a cotton farm in Turkey Scratch, Arkansas. As a boy, he'd often walk over to the nearby town of Helena, where blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson hosted *King Biscuit Time* at the KFFA radio station, and traveling variety shows like "Silas Green From New Orleans" and "F.S. Walcott's Rabbit Foot Minstrels" would set up camp. "They had costumes and dancers and comedians and a master of ceremonies with a top hat, twirling a cane," Helm says. In those days, the audience was segregated: "People with red hair and freckles would be on one side, and darker complexion on the other. I'd be sitting there right in front of the drummer, just staring at him all night."

After the main show was over, the MC would announce, "We're gonna have a Midnight Ramble, so all of you that have to go to work or take the kids to bed, we've enjoyed having you. The rest of you, we'll be right back around." For an added price, the show would continue for another half-hour. "That's when the jokes would get spicier, and the girls would do a hoochie-coochie dance," says Helm. "Back then, to get down to a bikini was like, 'Goddamn!'"

More than half a century later, and six years after being

Photograph by Martin Schoeller



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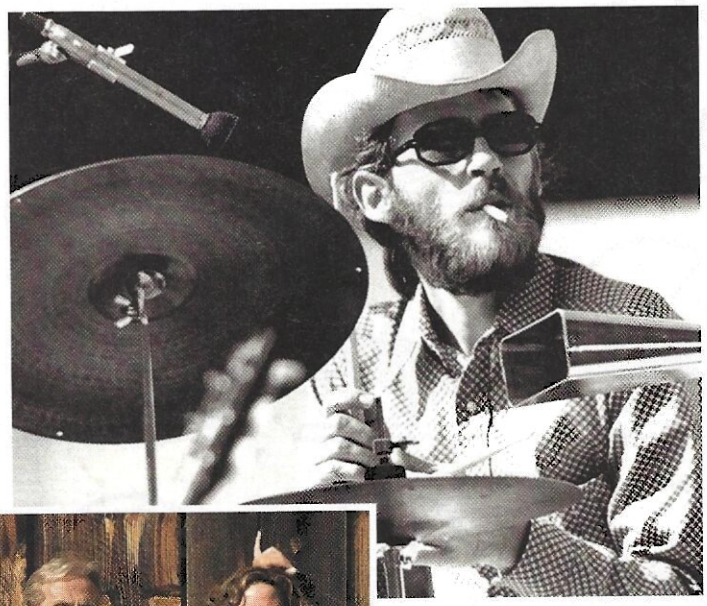
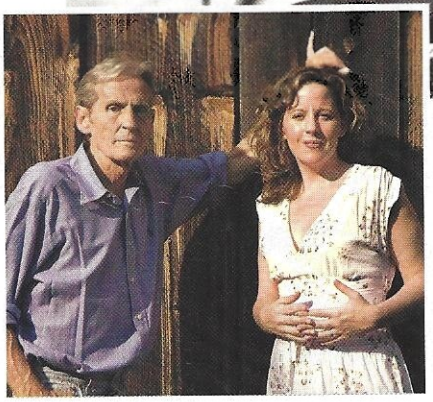
declared cancer-free, Levon staged his very first Ramble, with a band featuring Chuck Berry pianist Johnnie Johnson. With Helm's voice still weak, he concentrated on drums while Amy shared vocal duties with blues veteran Little Sammy Davis. "I'd just sing along if the songs were in the right key," Helm says. "Then it started coming back." By hosting the shows, Helm was able to ease back into singing, he says, "without some club owner or promoter telling me to sing a few 'old ones.'"





ROCK OF AGES Helm (above, circa 1970) plays Band classics at the Ramble. Daughter Amy (left, in 2007) often guests.

Campbell signed on as a kind of unofficial music director and right-hand man in 2004. "When I'd heard that he quit Bob, I called him immediately," says Helm, passing a joint across the kitchen table to his old friend. "I just always knew that me and Larry would partner up on something someday." Campbell jumped at the opportunity to team up with one of his heroes. "Anything that you can call original American music – old time, country, blues, rock & roll, soul – Levon does with complete authority," says Campbell. "It's everything I want to play." Near the end of the set, Campbell re-creates Garth Hudson's epic, classical-inspired organ intro from the Band's "Chest Fever." "If we're going to resurrect Band tunes, we've got to keep them faithful, but at the same time they have to evolve to become part of the personality of this band," Campbell says.

Helm is still pals with Hudson, who lives nearby and sits in once in a while. The drummer sings a killer version of "Ophelia" and "Rag Mama Rag," and he closes shows with his signature tune, "The Weight." And he smiles proudly when backing other vocalists on Band classics like "The Shape I'm In," "W.S. Walcott's Medicine Show" and "Long Black Veil." But when Helm speaks of the Band's timeless music, he calls it "the old stuff." During two interview sessions in his kitchen, he fails to mention the Band by name, as if uttering the words conjures up bad memories. In his autobiography, *This Wheel's on Fire,* Helm speaks of the open wounds caused by the tragic deaths of his bandmates Rick Danko and Richard Manuel, and his decades-old grudge with frontman and guitarist Robbie Robertson – who holds the publishing rights for the Band's catalog – over the true authorship of their work together. "When we first started having the Rambles, we made it a point not to do the old stuff," says Helm. "All of a sudden, we started doing it because the guys in the band wanted to. We trusted each other, and it's been nothing but fun."

Over the years, musicians including Elvis Costello, Emmylou Harris, Dr. John and Allen Toussaint have made their way to the barn. Most recently, Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, who lives nearby (and is married to Libby Titus, Levon's ex and Amy's mother), has become a regular. "In the last six weeks I've been there most Saturday nights," says Fagen. "It's a lot of fun. No muss, no fuss, less work for mother." Amazingly, for a band that usually exceeds a dozen musicians – including a five-piece horn section – the Ramble groups never rehearse. "We'll just talk down the songs, like, 'We'll do a verse, a chorus, a solo,'" says Helm. "Just plan it out. If we make a mistake, nobody minds."

Sitting in his kitchen, Helm pops open a glass bottle of Coca-Cola and smiles when someone points out a photo of his 16-month-old grandson, Lavon Henry. And when all the guests clear out, and the last joint is smoked, his wife of 28 years, Sandra, will come down to cure his munchies. "Mama'll warm up some pizza, or make me a salad with all kinds of good stuff," he says. "She makes her salad dressing, too. It's as sweet as it is sour!"

The musical spirit of Woodstock, which drew the Band, Bob Dylan and Van Morrison here in the Sixties, is alive and well in the barn. "There are no Taco Bells out here, boy," he says proudly. He has his family nearby, his dog Muddy at his feet, and more albums and Midnight Rambles on the horizon. "I've got the best job in the world," he says. "My job is to make people feel good, show them a good time, and, my God, what a blessing."

TOUR BRIEFS

Nine Inch Nails

August 22nd-September 6th
Tickets TBD
Openers: The Horrors, Mew

Despite declaring that NIN's Bonnaroo gig was Nine Inch Nails' "last show ever in the United States," Trent Reznor is staging a series of 10 intimate club shows before taking an indefinite break from the road. The Wave Goodbye Tour will hit New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, playing venues as small as 500 seats. "NIN as a band that's on the road all the time is stopping," Reznor said in a recent interview. "I've reached the point where [touring] has invaded every other aspect of my life. I think creatively my time would be better spent on other stuff."

Bruce Springsteen

August 19th-November 15th
Tickets $33-$104

After spending most of the summer in Europe, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band are returning to America for a series of shows that will take the *Working on a Dream* tour through mid-November. The dates include two nights at Madison

Square Garden and five at New Jersey's Giants Stadium – the last-ever concerts at the venue, which will be torn down next year.

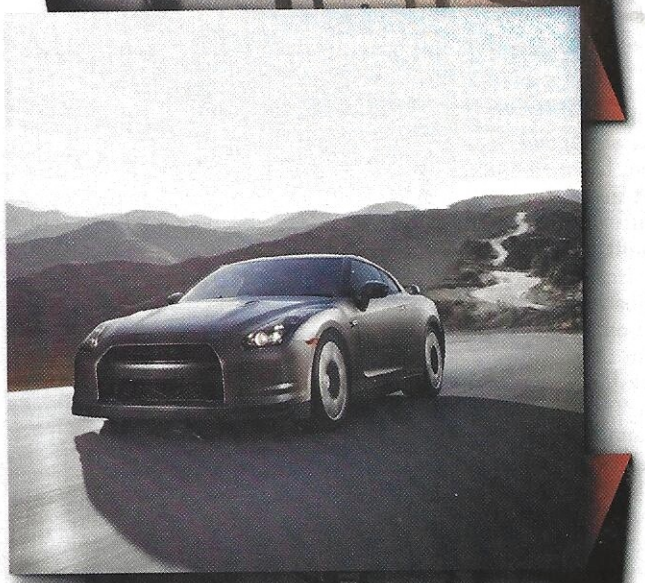
Arctic Monkeys

August 1st-October 5th
Tickets $25-$30

For their 23-date tour of theaters and clubs – which also includes stops at Lollapalooza and All Points West – Britpop crew Arctic Monkeys will debut tunes from their new Josh Homme-produced disc, *Humbug*, out in August. Expect fleshed-out takes on their back catalog too, thanks to a touring keyboardist and more harmonizing from the band. "We've wetted our whistles again and are more confident now," says frontman Alex Turner. Any chance of Homme joining the Monkeys for a couple of gigs? "He's a busy guy," says Turner, "but I'd love it if he joined us onstage."

FROM LEFT: AHRON R. FOSTER; JOEL AXELRAD/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

BRIDGESTONE



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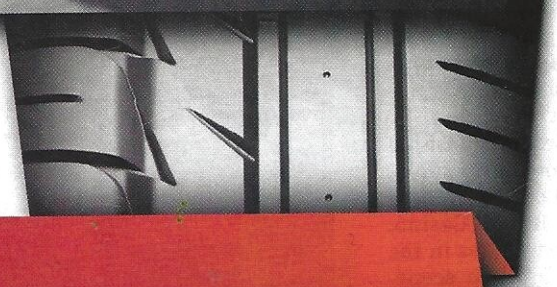

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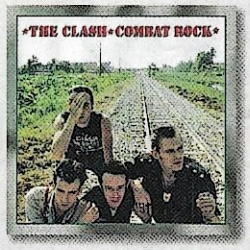
Clash Storm the Charts, Melt Down

Combat Rock made them into stars but also tore the band apart

By Andy Greene

THE CLASH ON BROADWAY Strummer, Jones and Paul Simonon (from left) in New York, 1981



Combat Rock

Released May 28th, 1982

Chart Peak Number Seven

Produced by Mick Jones, Glyn Johns

Recorded at Electric Lady Studios, New York

Key Tracks "Rock the Casbah," "Should I Stay or Should I Go"

When the Clash handed in the final mix of *Combat Rock* to their label in April 1982, there weren't many signs that the band's fifth record would launch the punk icons into the mainstream. Drummer Topper Headon had just been fired for a heroin addiction, and the songwriting team of Joe Strummer and Mick Jones was barely speaking. But then "Rock the Casbah" and "Should I Stay or Should I Go" exploded onto MTV, and the album shot to Number Seven. "We'd lost that unity of being a rebel rock & roll band," Headon recalls. "The danger was gone, and there wasn't anything to fight anymore – so then we started fighting internally."

Jones, as producer, insisted the Clash record in New York, where they'd recently played 17 nights at Bond's Casino, immersing themselves in the burgeoning hip-hop scene. "Mick thought if they left London, the British record company would leave them alone," says the band's co-manager, Kosmo Vinyl. "They thought the Clash were a bunch of juvenile delinquents."

The Clash arrived at New York's Electric Lady Studios in November 1981 with extremely different ideas of what the disc should sound like. Their previous album, the three-LP set *Sandinista!*, had fused punk, reggae, disco and rockabilly – but failed to connect with fans or critics. This time, Strummer wanted a hit, saying, "We're going to deliver an album that those suckers at CBS will serve up with Boston and Foreigner."

But Jones, inspired by new tapes by Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash, wanted to push the boundaries of their music even further. "The others used to call me 'Whack Attack,'" he said in 1986. "I was very affected by loud music in New York clubs. I thought the others would dig it too."

The chaos and creativity of the city seeped into Strummer's lyrics. "Red Angel Dragnet" tells the story of a member of the vigilante-justice group the Guardian Angels, gunned down by the NYPD. Jones wrote "Should I Stay or Should I Go" – often assumed to be about tensions within the band – about his girlfriend, Ellen Foley, a singer-actress who duetted with Meat Loaf on "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" and later starred on *Night Court*.

Midway through the sessions, Headon, struggling with his heroin addiction, went into the studio by himself, sat down at the piano and began to fiddle with a funky riff he'd been working on. With the engineer rolling tape, he overdubbed bass and drums. The band loved his creation but rejected the lyrics – a pornographic ode to Headon's girlfriend. Around the same time, the group was working on an epic raga number – co-manager Bernie Rhodes, desperate for a pop hit, asked, "Does everything have to be as long as a raga?" Strummer scribbled the line "The king told the boogie men, you have to let that raga drop." He expanded the lyric into a tale of rock & roll being banned in Iran, calling it "Rock the Casbah." "People are surprised when I tell them that was Joe's favorite Clash song," says Vinyl. "It's got politics, and you can shake your butt to it."

On December 31st, 1981, the group wrapped recording with "Straight to Hell." "We finished at about 20 to midnight," recalled Strummer, who died in 2002. "We took the E train from the Village up to Times Square. I'll never forget coming out of the subway, just before midnight, into a hundred billion people. I knew we'd just done something great."

His joy was short-lived. Jones mixed a two-LP version, which he called *Rat Patrol From Fort Bragg*, heavy on funk, reggae and hip-hop sounds. It was rejected by the group. Producer Glyn Johns, who worked on the Beatles' *Let It Be* and the Who's *Who's Next* (similarly troubled projects) was brought in to salvage the disc. Johns and Strummer ditched Jones' more experimental tracks – and shaved verses off the longer songs. "Mick's attitude was that I ruined his music," Strummer said in 1984. "Fifty percent of it was great rock, but the other 50 percent was what Phil Spector would call 'wiggy.'"

Ultimately, no one in the Clash was satisfied with the disc – even as it shot up the charts. Strummer soon fired Jones (over the creative tensions that had marred the sessions). After recording one last record as the Clash, the group was dissolved forever by Strummer. "Every band has a shelf life," says Headon. "Thank God we lived long enough to tell each other we're proud of what we did, we love each other, and we're glad we ended on a high." RS

Classic Album Rewind

With the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame gearing up for its 25th anniversary, Rolling Stone will look back at the stories behind five pivotal albums by Hall of Fame artists. This is the second in the series.

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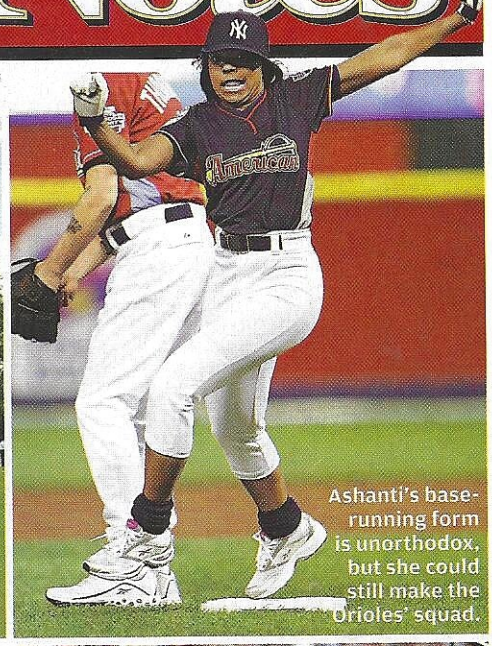
"I don't mind getting older, I mind getting uglier. Knees, disease, age…I'm a wreck." —Chrissie Hynde

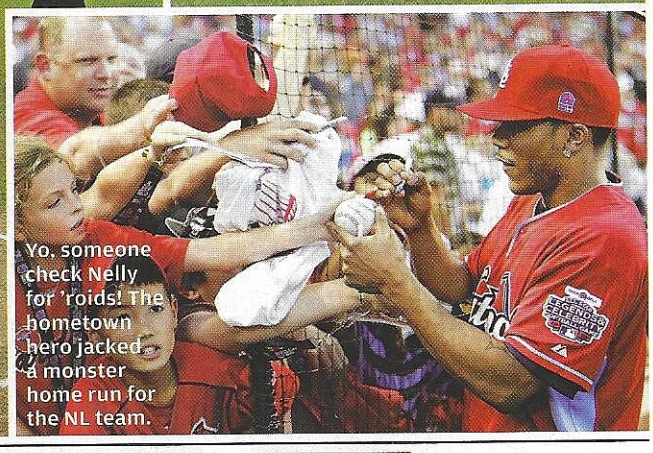
Random Notes

High on Grass

Guitar god Eric Clapton whipped out his bat and delivered some wicked googlies at a charity cricket match in England. Clapton – who played against former Stonesman Bill Wyman – raised dough for his Crossroads rehab center. In St. Louis during baseball's all-star festivities, lovebirds Ashanti and Nelly got their jockstrap on for the celebrity softball game.

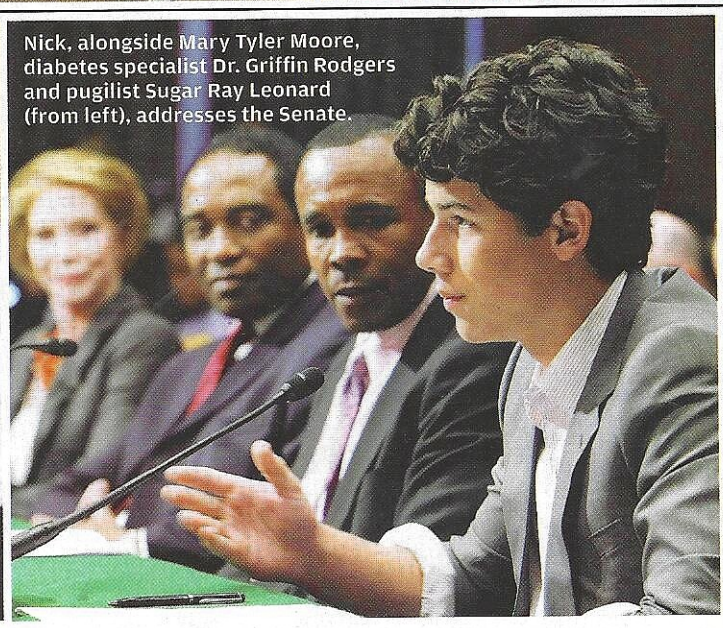


Ashanti's base-running form is unorthodox, but she could still make the Orioles' squad.



Yo, someone check Nelly for 'roids! The hometown hero jacked a monster home run for the NL team.

Kevin and his lass, Danielle Deleasa



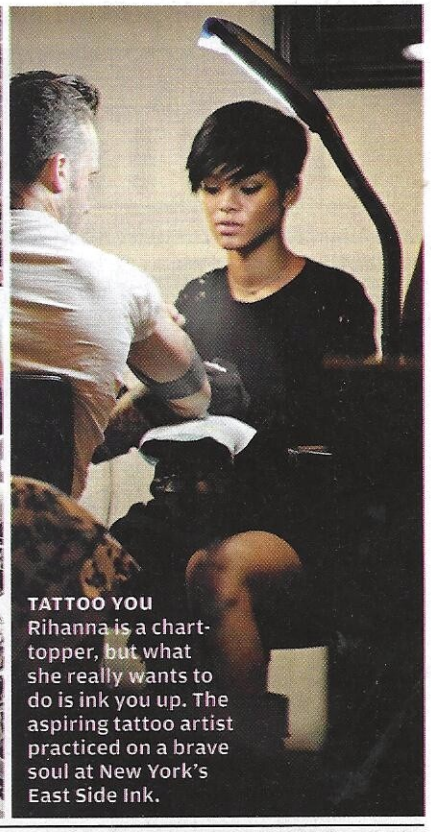
Nick, alongside Mary Tyler Moore, diabetes specialist Dr. Griffin Rodgers and pugilist Sugar Ray Leonard (from left), addresses the Senate.

Busy Bros

In between dates on the JoBros' supersize summer tour, the boys have squeezed in some important business. Nick, who lives with diabetes, went to Capitol Hill to try to get research funding for the disease. And Kevin – who can't wait to procreate – popped the question to his longtime sweetie, Danielle. "I flew from Vancouver to New Jersey," he reports. "I just rang her doorbell and dropped to my knee." As Kanye says, "We want prenup!"

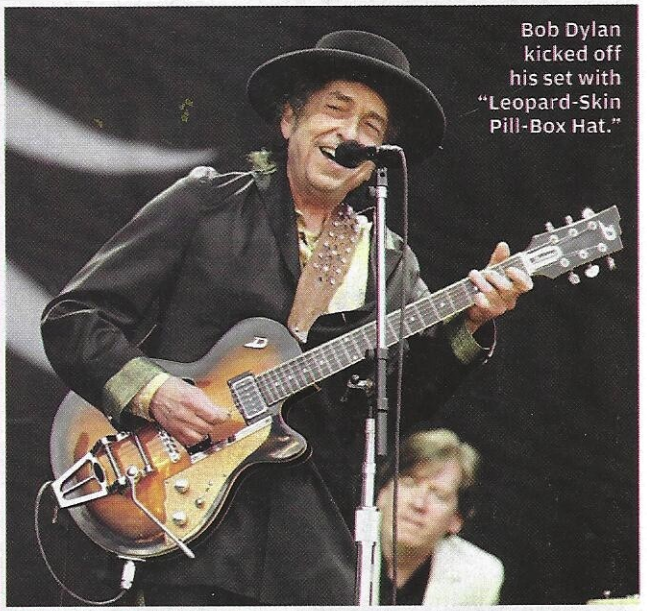
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CARL DE SOUZA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES. 2: LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS/LANDOV; NO CREDIT

LIVE AND LET RIDE Before invading the U.S. for a brief tour – with stops at Fenway Park and New York's Citi Field – Paul McCartney played for 50,000 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Macca played a rare rendition of "Day Tripper" and the Wings deep cut "Mull of Kintyre," and posed with a few of Halifax's finest.



TATTOO YOU Rihanna is a chart-topper, but what she really wants to do is ink you up. The aspiring tattoo artist practiced on a brave soul at New York's East Side Ink.

Willie Nelson teamed up with reggae legend Toots Hibbert.



Bob Dylan kicked off his set with "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat."

Rothbury Rocks!

The second Rothbury Festival brought a horde of hippies to northern Michigan, where Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan joined a lineup of jammers like the Dead and String Cheese Incident. Party animal Girl Talk (a.k.a. Gregg Gillis) DJ'd into the night and body-surfed into the throng. "I almost made it to the campgrounds," says Gillis, who was inappropriately groped. "I didn't mind. It's not like I was walking through the grocery store and someone grabbed my balls."

"People were clearly out of their minds," says Gillis, who DJ'd past 4 a.m.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: VALERIE JODOIN KEATON; ALEQUIN/HARDING/INFPHOTO; TAYLOR HILL/FILMMAGIC, 3

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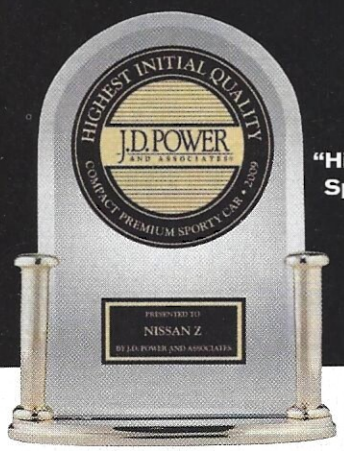

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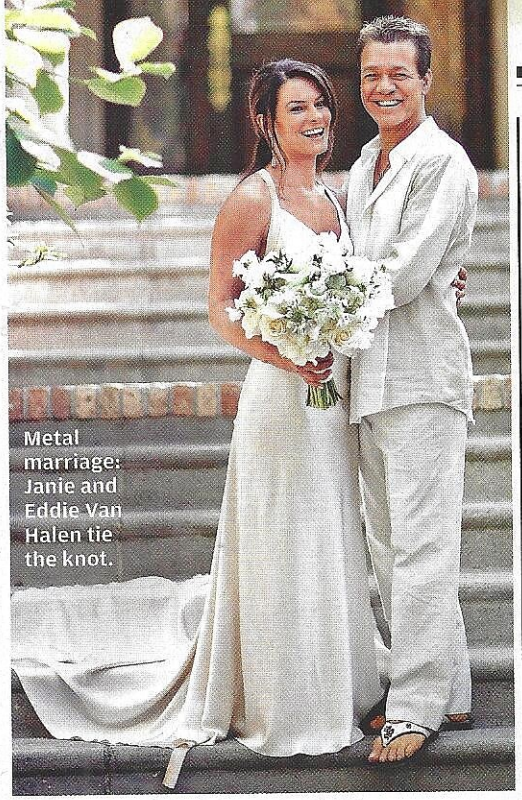
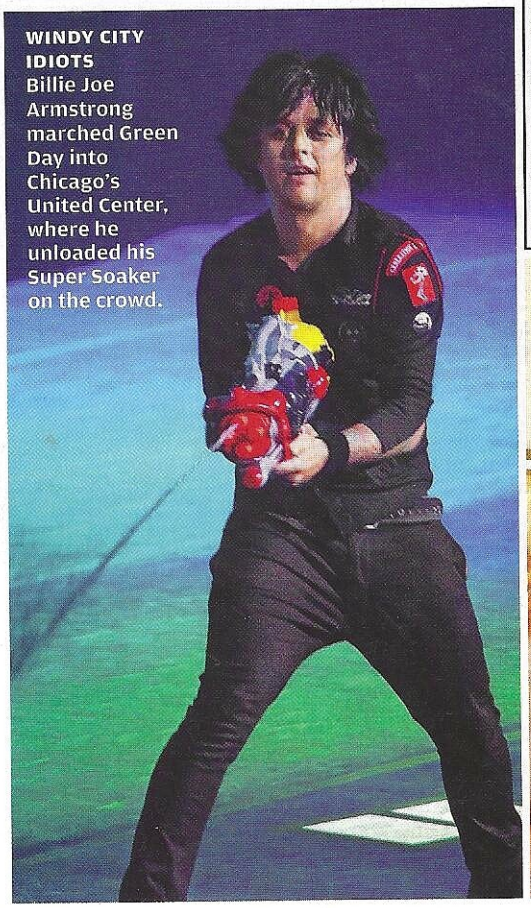


Metal marriage: Janie and Eddie Van Halen tie the knot.

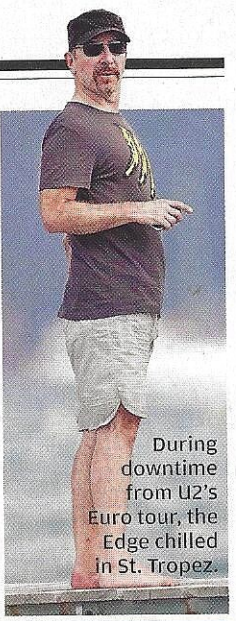
Eruption of Love

How badass is it that Eddie Van Halen's bride, Janie Liszewski, walked down the aisle to the Hagar-era gem "When It's Love"? Alex Van Halen, an ordained minister (seriously!), led the ceremony in L.A., and Eddie rocked some dazzling white flip-flops. Fashion faux pas? "For a rock star, I'd call that conservative," comments manners expert Anna Post. "But my great-great-grandmother Emily would've been appalled."

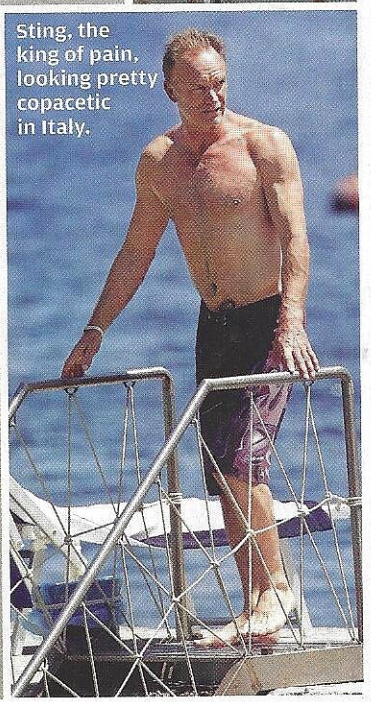


WINDY CITY IDIOTS Billie Joe Armstrong marched Green Day into Chicago's United Center, where he unloaded his Super Soaker on the crowd.

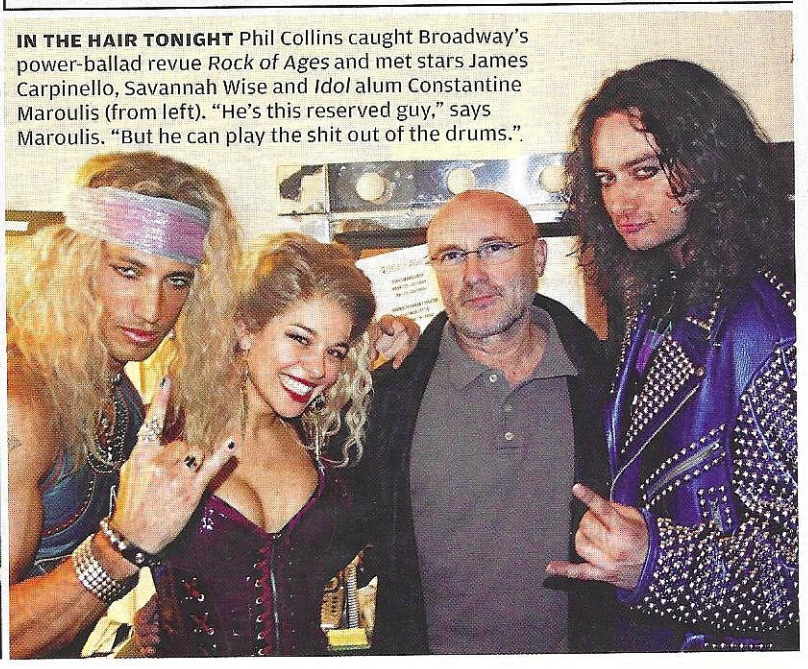
TURKISH DELIGHT As summer heats up, rockers like Sting and the Edge have been cooling off seaside. Katy Perry took a T.O. from her world tour (and took her puppies out for a walk) while on vacation in Turkey.



During downtime from U2's Euro tour, the Edge chilled in St. Tropez.



Sting, the king of pain, looking pretty copacetic in Italy.



IN THE HAIR TONIGHT Phil Collins caught Broadway's power-ballad revue *Rock of Ages* and met stars James Carpinello, Savannah Wise and *Idol* alum Constantine Maroulis (from left). "He's this reserved guy," says Maroulis. "But he can play the shit out of the drums."

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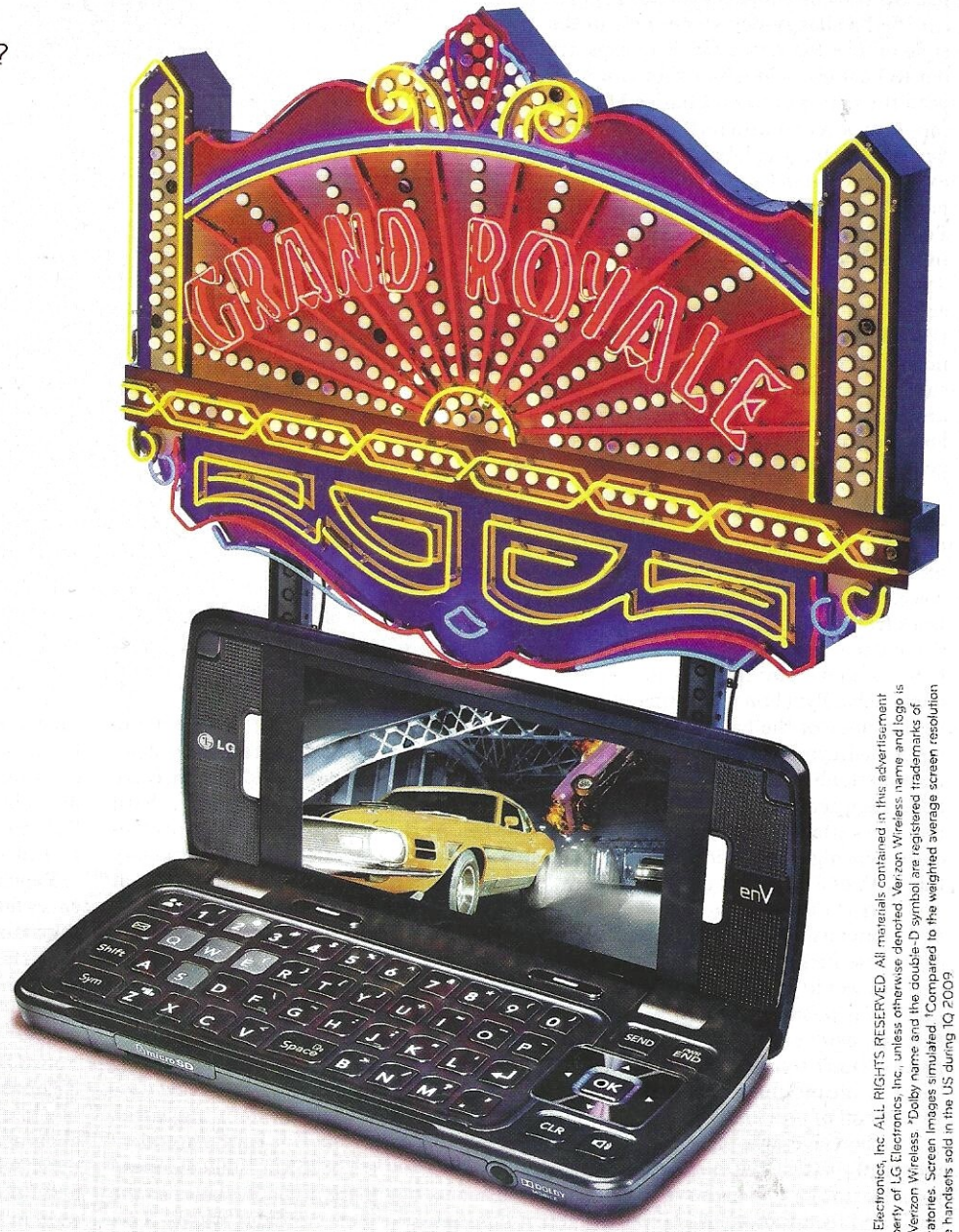

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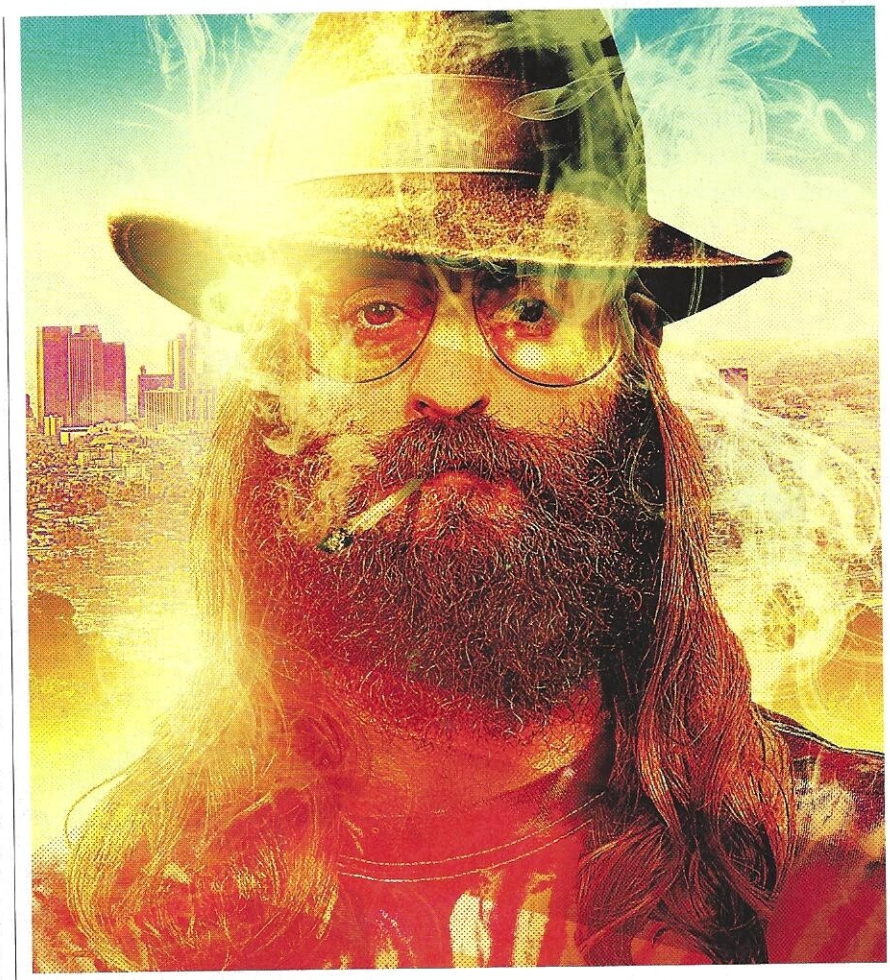
The Bigger Lebowski

Going the Dude one better, reclusive mind-blower Thomas Pynchon elegizes the Sixties with the ultimate stoner-noir detective novel

By Rob Sheffield



IT'S L.A. CIRCA 1970, AND EVERYone's running scared. The hippie chick who used to wear the Country Joe and the Fish T-shirt has disappeared, and the man on the trail is private eye Doc Sportello, who lives on weed and pizza and rock & roll, plus the motto "Never smoke nothing's been grown in a combat zone." That's just the start of Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, a shaggy-dog stoner noir in the style of *The Big Lebowski*. The cops are out to bust every longhair they can find, with the media cartoon Charles Manson (not even a real murderer!) as an excuse. Doc tangles with a global heroin network called the Golden Fang. There's a massage parlor called Chick Planet that offers a Pussy Eaters Special for $14.95. Doc runs into Panthers, neo-Nazis, gurus, grifters, Jesus-freak surfers and a police branch called the P-DIDdies, meaning "Public Disorder Intelligence Division." As Doc notes, "The world had just been disassembled, anybody here could be working any hustle you could think of, and it was long past time to be, as Shaggy would say, gettin' out of here, Scoob."

Inherent Vice is the funniest book Pynchon has written. It's also a crazed and majestic summary of everything that makes him a uniquely huge American voice. It has the moral fury that's fueled his work from the start – his ferociously batshit compassion for America and the lost tribes who wander through it. A master of pastiche, Pynchon is working this time in the mode of the hard-boiled detective novel à la Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, although it's more like a hard-boiled egg scrambled during a late-night munchies attack – it's as if he watched *Lebowski* one night and said, "Fuck, I can do that with one hand tied behind my back."

Inherent Vice is full of his favorite kind of Americans, too: transcendental slackers whose fuck-it-all laziness and innate decency would give them an inside line on satori if it wasn't such hard work. Nonetheless, they are people who take the motto "Don't tread on me" seriously but think it means the same thing as "Hey, you, get off of my cloud."

Pynchon savors the boilerplate film-noir tough-guy patter ("Big mistake, pal. Fact is, your life ain't long enough to make a bigger one") and teen-moron jokes (interrogated by the cops, Doc asks them, "Can I be frank for a minute?" – and then starts singing "Fly Me to the Moon"), all rushing by at breakneck speed. But the mood is after-hours stoner-outlaw dread. Nixon's the president, Reagan's the governor, free love has become a scam, and the stoners have turned to hard drugs. As Doc notes grimly, "Life in psychedelic-Sixties L.A. offered more cautionary arguments than you could wave a joint at against too much trust, and the Seventies were looking no more promising."

Psychedelic noir is still an underexploited genre, besides *Lebowski* and the Firesign Theatre's comedy classic "Nick Danger, Third Eye." But nothing less would suit the story Pynchon's telling here. *Inherent Vice* spans just a few days in early 1970 – you can date the action by the NBA playoffs Doc watches – when the air is full of "post-Mansonical vibes." It seems like there are a few holes in the chronology – Lew Alcindor wasn't Kareem Abdul-Jabbar yet, and much as I love the joke about Doc hitting the deli because he's got a "matzoh-ball jones," Cheech and Chong didn't do "Basketball Jones" until 1973. But given the book's typical Pynchon aura of drug-induced time travel and hallucinatory premonitions, it would be a little weird if the fabric of time didn't get fucked with to some degree.

Pynchon flashes the Sixties rock references faster than a Ten Years After guitar solo: His characters walk around wearing T-shirts from Pearls Before Swine, name-drop the Electric Prunes, turn up the Stones' "Something Happened to Me Yesterday" on the radio. (I had never heard of Bonzo Dog Band's "Bang Bang" before, but it's on my iPod now.) The rock & roll fanboy love on every page is a feast for Pynchon obsessives, since we've always wondered what the man listens to. After all, he and Bob Dylan had a close friend in common in the early 1960s, folk-rocker Richard Farina – and it's impossible to read the last 50 pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* without imagining Neil Young's song "After

Illustration by SEAN MCCABE

the Gold Rush" or David Bowie's "Space Oddity" in the background. The songs are fragments in the elegiac tapestry for the Sixties, an era full of hippie slobs who just wanted to be left alone and so accidentally backed into heroic flights of revolutionary imagination. Can you dig it? Pynchon probably can.

One of the funniest characters in *Inherent Vice* is the bad guy – a cop named Bigfoot Bjornsen, and to steal a line from *Gravity's Rainbow*, he's a "shit on my dick or blood on my blade" type, a psycho who spends his free time at the Waste-a-Perp Target Range. Yet Doc has sympathy for the cops, because he respects the way they operate by a code of loyalty (even when that code becomes an excuse to set his ass up).

Pynchon's books elegize freedoms given up, moral opportunities chickened out on.

He also has sympathy for the stoners and grifters and anarchist crazies just looking for a little shelter before the whole shithouse goes up in flames. Despite the kill-your-parents stereotype of hippie culture, Doc's mom and dad are totally lovable – by the end of the novel, they even try to score pot from him, so they can get high and watch *Another World*.

LIKE DYLAN, PYNCHON IS AN American original who got that way by dreaming up an America that was big enough to hold him. He's the ultimate literary rock star, the mystery tramp who's spent nearly 50 years mixing up the medicine with epic pretensions and dirty jokes. Few living American artists loom as large as Pynchon – yet nobody is less of a public figure or more of a wiseass. He's dogged with the image of an intimidating modernist master who's too complex to read, but don't let that stop you. He's one of the funniest Americans who ever lived.

Pynchon is still obsessed with the same things he's always been obsessed with: conspiracies, old-time radio, crackpot history, sex, drugs, rock & roll, shameful puns, comic books, late-night zombie movies and the sneaking suspicion that Southern California is a joke played on the world by hostile alien intelligences.

It's totally understandable to be daunted by Pynchon – he crams his books with so much science and religion and thrift-store debris, it isn't even an option to get all the way to the bottom of them. But even *Gravity's Rainbow*, the 776-page 1973 rocket-science epic that gives first-time readers that recto-genital throb of fear, is as friendly, warm and humane under the

"Machine Gun" solo. Imagine a Hendrix who didn't die in 1970 – one who just said fuck it, went into hiding in Waimea Canyon or somewhere, broke his silence every few years with a six-hour epic, then went right back to work.

Gravity's Rainbow, my favorite of Pynchon's books, is also the one I spent years bailing on after the first 50 pages; really, the way is to plow ahead, keep an ear out for the jokes and worry about making sense of it all when it's over. You have to suspend your will-to-order and let him take you where the story's taking him; you get your reading of the book, which will always be your own eccentric and partial reading, and then you see where *that* takes you. As they say in the Zone, the bombed-out post-WWII German cityscape at the end of *GR*, "the arrows are pointing all different ways." He piles on the cracked science and grim history as if overload is the whole point, which for him it usually is. His vision is dark but not depressive, maybe because even at his most demanding, he's never a cold aesthete; the deeper into his world you go, the more clearly you hear his voice as a generous, goofy stoner uncle who doesn't want the nuclear cowboys and plutes to blow up the planet because *The Bionic Woman* is on tonight. Hey, your turn to call for the pizza.

The America Pynchon loves is a ragtag collection of lost republics, a line of surrenders and defeats as long and sordid as U.S. history itself. All his books elegize freedoms given up, moral opportunities chickened out on, open futures beaten into the dust: the labor struggles of the 1910s, the U.S. Postal Service wiping out the Pony Express, Mason and Dixon drawing a line down the middle of the country. Sometimes these laments are baleful and dead-serious. Other times, they're just put-ons, as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when he blames World War II on the FDA forcing Coca-Cola to take the cocaine out of their soda pop in 1904. But for him, the lost promise of the Sixties is perhaps the signal defeat of our time. There's a famously touching scene in *Vineland* when a couple of hippies listen to Sam Cooke and mourn "the scabland garrison state the green free America of their childhoods even then was turning into." *Inherent Vice* has the same elegiac tone, but it's less sentimental about the past, less black-and-white in its moral conflicts. It makes the grief sincere by turning it into a skeezy joke.

Nobody else in our culture has a laugh big enough to make that joke resonate the way it does in *Inherent Vice*. The hero of *Gravity's Rainbow* could sense the V-2 rocket right before it hit; *Inherent Vice* has mystic surfers who hear the Surfaris' "Wipeout" cackle right before they take their fatal crash. Either way, that's the universe Pynchon invites us into – a laughing comes across the sky just before the wipeout!

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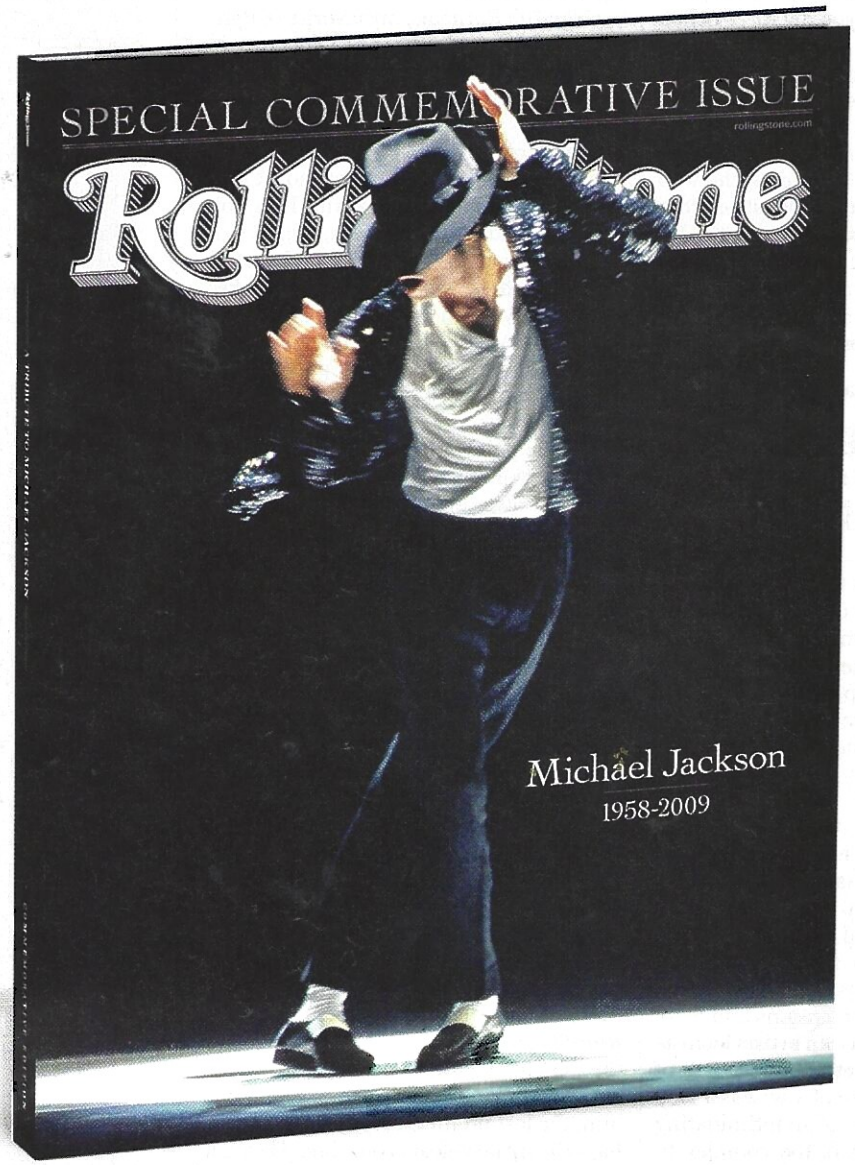

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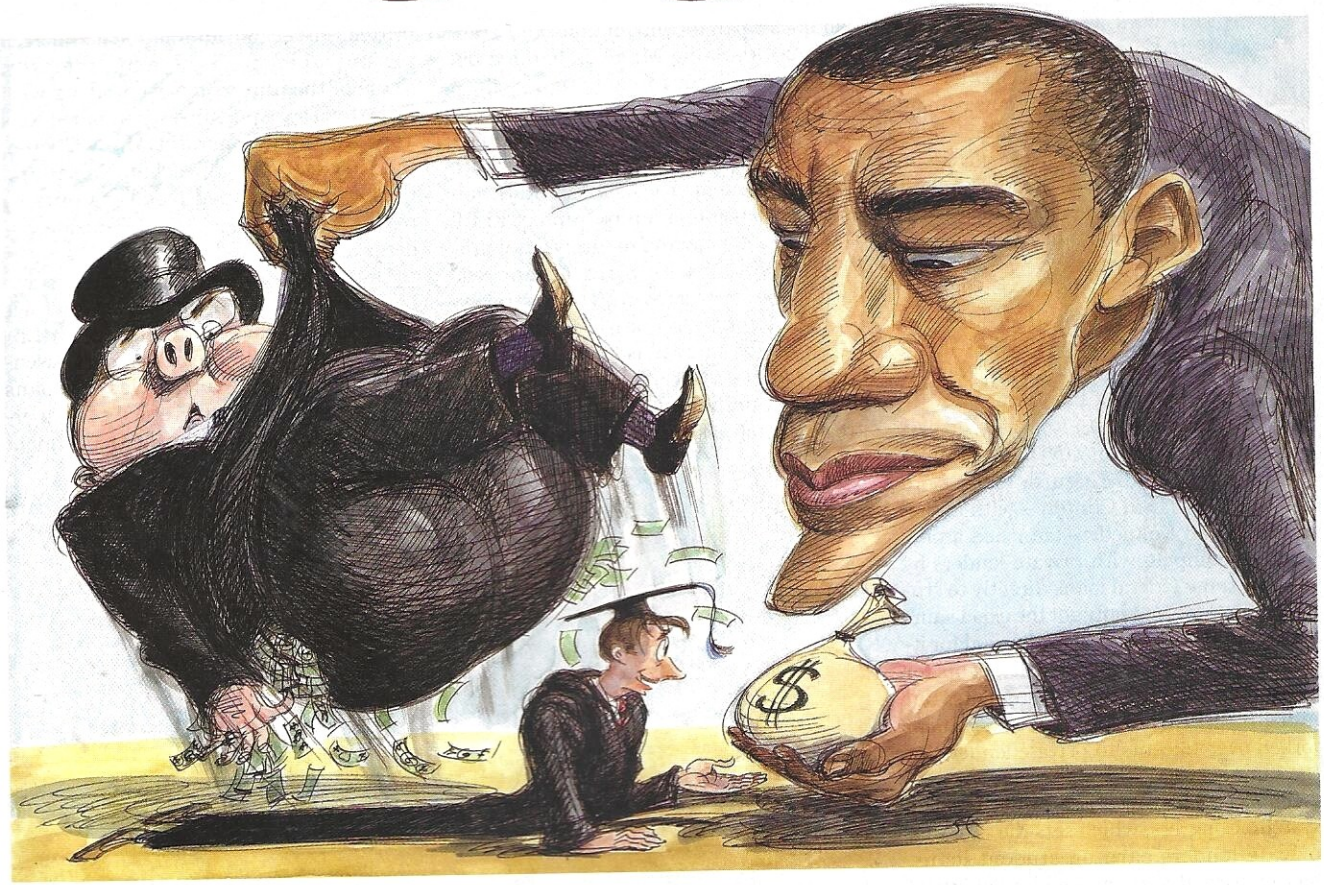


Obama's Real Reform

The president is on the verge of shutting down the loan sharks who prey on college students – freeing up billions in federal aid

★ *By Tim Dickinson* ★

ON HEALTH CARE, BARACK Obama's trademark pragmatism appears to be dooming any chance for fundamental reform: The president has not only refused to fight for a government-run, single-payer system, he's even waffling about a public option to compete with corporate insurers. But when it comes to student loans, the president has shaken off his tendency to compromise – and is on the verge of reining in the loan sharks who prey on college students.

Since 1965, government has helped students finance college through the Federal Family Education Loan program. The system essentially operates as a lucrative form of corporate welfare, offering a guaranteed rate of return for banks and other middlemen who provide capital for student loans. The government not only makes all the decisions – who is eligible for loans, for what amount and at what rate – but it protects private lenders from virtually any risk: When college students are unable to repay their debts, taxpayers are required by law to reimburse the banks for 97 percent of the losses. "The government is doing all the work and taking all the risk," says Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

For a president who relishes in shades of gray, Obama has framed the battle over student lending in black and white. Instead of issuing his usual paeans to bipartisanship, the president wants to terminate FFEL (pronounced *fell*) – replacing private lending with direct government loans to students. "This is not a debate between growing the size of government and relying on the free market," Obama said in outlining his plan in April. "Because it's not a free market when we have a student-loan system that's rigged to reward private lenders without any risk." The real question, he concluded, is "whether we want to give tens of billions of tax dollars to special interests or whether we want to make college more affordable for 8.5 million more students."

Obama's proposal represents the educational equivalent of moving to a single-payer system of health care, shutting down the private insurers who are responsible for driving up costs. "It's a polar shift of everything we've seen since 1965," says Jeff Noordhoek, who has fought the plan as president of the student-lending giant Nelnet. And like single-payer health care, the potential savings are massive: Obama's proposal would eliminate $87 billion in subsidies to private lenders over the next decade, much of which would then be reinvested to boost federal scholarships known as Pell Grants by $1,400 and to put another 5 million students through community college. Under Obama's plan, Pell Grants would also become an entitlement program like Medicare and Social Security, replete with guaranteed annual increases pegged to inflation. "The Obama administration has stepped in, in a very bold way, to fix aid programs and make them more effective," says Christine Lindstrom, director of higher-education programs for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. "This is game-changing."

FFEL WAS INAUGURATED IN 1965 with good intentions. At the time, there was no federal body to administer government loans – the Department of Education didn't even exist. To make matters worse, federal accounting rules required that direct loans from the government be recorded as a loss in the year they were made, while private loans guaranteed by the government were booked as a loss only in the event of default. Given the weird budget rules, asking private lenders to raise the capital for student loans made sound policy sense.

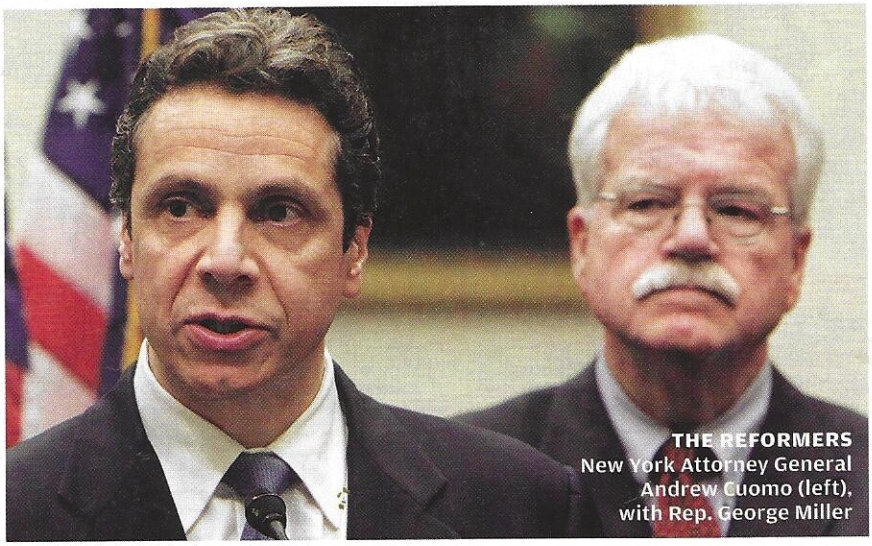
But the logic for subsidizing private lenders evaporated in 1990, when the first Bush administration revised accounting standards to distinguish loans from losses. In 1993, Bill Clinton – with an assist from Ted Kennedy – launched a program to compete with private lenders by making some federal loans directly to students. Students not only got the exact same loans, but the program actually paid for itself. In 2006, taxpayers earned 2 cents for every dollar lent directly to students. But under the FFEL program, the government forked over 15 cents to private lenders for the same service.

Those high prices are built into the system. Congress, which sets the rate that private lenders earn on student loans, has historically guaranteed a return of around two percent. That may not sound like much, until you consider the volume of business: There are currently $413 billion in outstanding FFEL loans. That's why industry giant Sallie Mae – which provides one-fourth of all student loans – clocked in as the second-most-profitable company in the world in 2005.

"The student-loan industry is as close as you can get to letting industry set their own subsidy rates," says Jason Delisle, a veteran Republican budget staffer who now directs the Federal Education Budget Project for the nonpartisan New America Foundation. "Congress was writing these subsidies into law, and the lobbyists encourage them to make it as high as possible."

Costs to taxpayers have also been driven up by another middleman – some 35 guaranty agencies that receive $1.5 billion a year in federal subsidies for helping students avoid default. But the way the rules are structured, the agencies actually have an incentive to let students fail on their college debts. The agencies collect a fee of one percent for assisting students who fall behind on their payments – but can pocket up to 38.5 percent aiding students who default. Sallie Mae does even better by serving as the collection agent for the largest guaranty agency, meaning it profits both from making loans and from squeezing students who default. "It's crooked," says Delisle.

To keep this lucrative scheme in place, private lenders rely on a potent combination of campaign contributions and graft. Since 2000, Sallie Mae has handed out nearly $5 million in campaign cash. A leaked "Federal Government Relations Strategy Discussion" memo from 2006 reveals what the company expects in return for its investment. The memo outlines Sallie Mae's determination to "protect FFEL economics" by moving to "grow [the] pro-FFEL coalition within the Democratic Party." The key to such growth? A strategy to "direct congressional PAC giving" to conservatives known as "Blue Dog Democrats." Since 2000, Sallie Mae has also spent $17.7 million on lobbyists – costs that are ultimately subsidized by taxpayers.



THE REFORMERS New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo (left), with Rep. George Miller

One student-loan scam perpetrated during the Bush years cost taxpayers close to $1 billion before it was shut down.

When such influence-peddling hasn't worked, private lenders have resorted to outright corruption. Using their taxpayer-generated profits, lenders have offered college financial-aid offices a brazen array of kickbacks to use the FFEL program rather than the government's direct-loan program started by Clinton. The "incentives" have ranged from $100,000 in stock options (Columbia) to lucrative consulting fees (Johns Hopkins). In one egregious attempt to persuade the University of Maryland to list it as a "preferred lender," loan giant Nelnet gave the school a $50,000 "donation." Several lenders also created "revenue sharing" that kicked back a portion of the profits on student loans to schools, meaning that universities like Duquesne were directly profiting from helping drive their students into debt.

"This program was on its own, without a lot of oversight," says Rep. George Miller, who has led the fight for reform as chairman of the House Education Committee. "It became an unethical and even a criminal enterprise – and, tragically, many of the universities went along with it." After a sweeping investigation by New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, industry leaders Sallie Mae, Nelnet and Citibank sidestepped fraud lawsuits by paying $2 million each to help educate students about college loans.

Under the Bush administration, some lenders went even further to jack up their profits on student loans. Using an Enron-like accounting scam, lenders essentially cloned an expiring class of loans that were guaranteed a return of 9.5 percent. In 2006, an audit by the Department of Education found that Nelnet had improperly ballooned its portfolio of high-interest loans by more than $3 billion. In a sweetheart settlement, the company agreed to stop cooking the books – and the Bush administration let Nelnet keep $278 million in ill-gotten profits. Overall, the scandal perpetrated by some dozen lenders cost the government close to $1 billion before it was finally shut down in 2007.

ULTIMATELY, HOWEVER, THE death knell for FFEL wasn't corruption but the collapsing credit market. Last year, when private lenders found themselves unable to raise enough capital to finance student loans, Congress authorized the Department of Education to step in and provide them with the capital directly. Suddenly, taxpayers were in the bizarre position of paying banks to take taxpayer money, and then paying them again to return it. "It makes no sense," says Miller. "Over 10

LAUREN VICTORIA BURKE/AP IMAGES

years, it costs us $90 billion to loan our money out and buy it back."

Rather than try to resuscitate FFEL, Obama is demanding euthanasia. Even more surprising, industry leader Sallie Mae announced it would not fight the administration's plan to provide loans directly to students. "We are not trying to preserve lender subsidies," Sallie Mae CFO Jack Remondi told Congress. "Nor are we trying to preserve the FFEL program as we know it." Instead, the company – along with Nelnet and two other lenders – secured a lucrative deal in June to begin servicing direct loans that the government has already taken on during the credit crunch.

To preserve some role for themselves, private lenders have proposed an alternative to "enhance" Obama's plan – one that would allow them to continue issuing student loans on the government's behalf for a flat fee of $75 per loan. Although the industry insists that its proposal will yield the same savings as the Obama plan – "we believe it's going to be very, very close," says Noordhoek of Nelnet – the administration estimates that the flat fee would enable industry to walk away with $1 billion a year that could otherwise go to students.

Lenders claim that Obama's plan will imperil 35,000 private-sector jobs. But when pressed, Noordhoek concedes that the industry's number includes tens of thousands of loan-servicing jobs that will be preserved under Obama's plan. So what's the true number of jobs that will be lost? "I couldn't give you an exact number," he says. "Ballpark? A third? Maybe higher?"

To bolster the jobs argument, Sallie Mae made a great show of announcing in April that it plans to bring 2,000 jobs previously outsourced to the Philippines and India back to the United States. "It's just political hokum and desperation on their part," says Miller. "When they were making more money than God, Sallie Mae sent the jobs out of the country. Now they're trying to convince the Congress that when times are bad, they're going to bring the jobs back?" Over the long run, direct government lending will actually provide greater job security than the private sector can offer – because federal jobs, by law, cannot be outsourced.

In July, Miller introduced Obama's plan, essentially unaltered, for a quick vote in the House, where passage is virtually assured. The Senate, congressional staffers admit, is a thornier battle. The industry has reliable allies among the Democratic caucus – chief among them Sen. Ben Nelson of Nebraska, the home base of Nelnet. In his last re-election campaign, Nelson received more than $64,000 in contributions from officials of Nelnet and its affiliate Union Bank. "They make a lot of money, they give a lot of donations, and there are a lot of jobs in the state," says Delisle, the former GOP staffer. "That's what that's about."

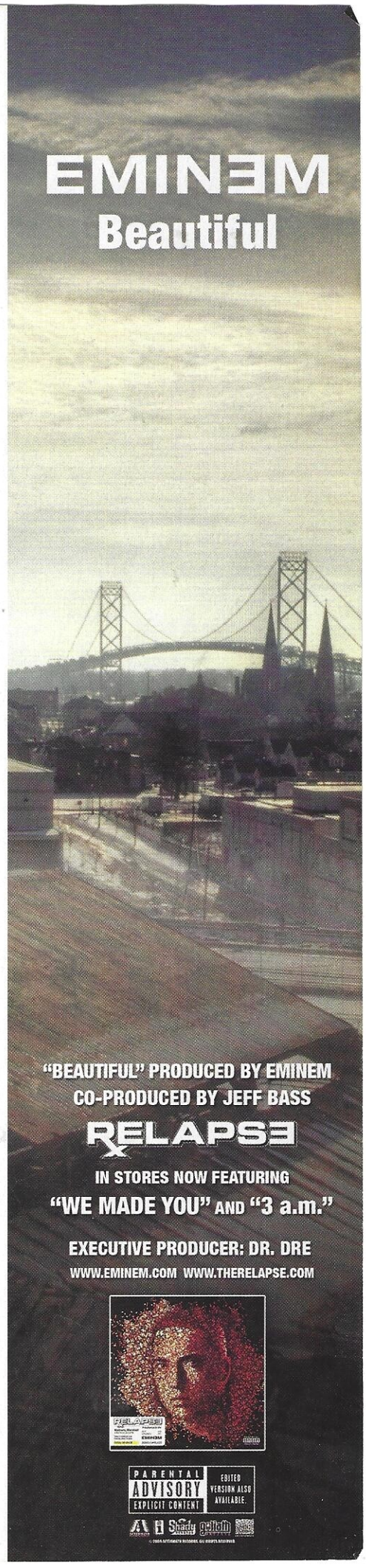
Nelson, in fact, has emerged as one of the biggest roadblocks to the president's agenda, working to weaken Obama's stimulus package and deprive state governments of $40 billion in federal assistance. Other Blue Dog Democrats in the Senate – including Evan Bayh of Indiana, Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas and Mary Landrieu of Louisiana – fought Obama's efforts to preserve the estate tax, and some have tried to block a "public option" in health care to compete with private insurers.

But thanks to a budget battle this spring, Democrats have the power to enact student-loan reform through a process called reconciliation, a parliamentary procedure that sidesteps the filibuster and requires only a simple majority for passage. In protest of reconciliation, Nelson voted against the president's budget. "Getting 60 votes on this would be almost impossible," concedes a top Senate staffer. "Getting 51, we can do."

Congressional leaders and the administration both express confidence that Obama's proposal will reach his desk essentially unscathed – with one exception. Because of budget rules tied to the reconciliation process, it's unlikely that Pell Grants – the main form of federal aid for low-income students – will become a full government entitlement program this year. "We expect Congress will go along with our goal to have a Pell Grant that rises over the years by inflation plus one percent," says Bob Shireman, Obama's deputy undersecretary of education. "It's the same path that we laid out, but it may not all be on the mandatory side of the budget as we had proposed."

Ultimately, observers say, the biggest obstacle to student-loan reform may not be opposition from the industry or Blue Dog Democrats but the fate of health care reform. Democrats have the authority to pass health care with 51 votes – but reconciliation is a one-shot deal, meaning that health care and student-loan reform would both have to pass on the same vote. "If they do a reconciliation health care bill and it goes down in flames for some reason," says one Senate staffer, "then student-loan reform will go down with it."

But leading Democrats remain confident that reform will pass – providing more federal aid to millions of college students. "Our economic challenges are too serious, and higher education is too important, for us to continue to waste tens of billions of dollars administering student-loan programs that could be far more efficient," says Sen. Ted Kennedy, who helped launch the reform effort in 1993. "We know we can do better in helping hard-working American students get the education and training they need to succeed. For four decades I have worked toward this goal in the U.S. Senate. With President Obama's leadership, we can finally make this aspiration a reality."



Frail, deep in debt and addicted to drugs, he was consumed by a single dream: to blow people's minds with the greatest concerts ever. Inside the comeback that almost was

The Last Days *of* Michael Jackson

By Claire Hoffman

MICHAEL JACKSON'S BODY LAY ON A METAL GURNEY in the county morgue in downtown Los Angeles. He was dressed in shiny black trousers, a thin hospital gown and nothing else. His feet were bare, his left arm scored with needle marks. His pale, narrow chest was covered in bruises – evidence of the medical efforts over the past few hours to save his life. Doctors and security guards milled in and out of the little room containing the gurney, eager to catch a glimpse of Jackson's body. ★ It had started that Thursday morning, when Jackson's own live-in doctor had tried frantically to revive him. By the time the medics arrived, responding to a desperate call to 911 at 12:21 p.m., they wanted to pronounce him dead on the spot.

IN THE SHADOWS
Jackson leaving an L.A. clinic on May 21st, a month before his death

But Michael Jackson couldn't be dead. His body was lifted into the back of an ambulance and rushed to UCLA Medical Center, where a team of doctors worked for another hour, pounding a defibrillator on Jackson's chest, all of them hoping that they could keep one of music's greatest entertainers from ending up in this morgue.

Jackson's face, which he had so painfully reworked and concealed from the public for decades, now lay out in the open, undisguised under the morgue's harsh lights. The prosthesis he normally attached to his damaged nose was missing, revealing bits of cartilage surrounding a small, dark hole. But to those who passed through the room, Jackson's face looked porcelain, impeccable. After years of torment, Michael was finally at rest. "Seeing him lying there," recalls one eyewitness, "he looked peaceful."

It was still a day before the autopsy, when pathologists would open him up and try to understand why a thin, 50-year-old man who had danced for hours the night before would die so suddenly. But as Jackson lay in the morgue on the afternoon of June 25th, detectives were already inside the singer's rented château in Bel-Air, gathering up the mother lode of prescription drugs that he kept on hand. Most frightening were numerous reports that the two large bags of medication investigators removed contained vials of Diprivan, a powerful anesthetic used to put patients under before surgery. Jackson had reportedly been using Diprivan for years to help him sleep, and L.A. police were soon looking into whether his death should be considered a homicide, making it clear that they wanted to question Jackson's physician, Dr. Conrad Murray. Murray had demanded $1 million a month to work for Jackson – and had vanished after his client was pronounced dead in the UCLA emergency room.

Within hours of Michael's death, La Toya Jackson reportedly descended upon her brother's home, frantically searching for the bags of cash she knew he kept there, and in a matter of days, their mother raced to court to fight for control of Michael's estate and custody of his three children. The kids had followed Jackson to the hospital in a blue Escalade, and the job of telling them that their father was dead fell to Michael's manager, Frank DiLeo, who had nearly fainted when a nurse broke the news to him. This was the Michael Jackson that the world knew and mocked: the crazy family, the botched plastic surgeries, the two divorces, the charges of child molestation, the financial woes that had left him an estimated $500 million in debt.

But Michael had a different view. In his final days, he not only dreamed of a comeback, he worked as hard as he could to pull it off, maybe as hard as he ever had in his life. He wrote new songs, rehearsed hour after grueling hour to perfect the shows that would pay off his debts and mark his return to greatness, and planned every detail of his comeback tour – a massive spectacle that had already cost at least $25 million in pre-production alone. Jackson gave the tour its title, and the name said it all: This Is It. Jackson knew what people thought of him, and he was going to change their perceptions, just as he had so many times before.

In the final months of his life, Jackson thought of nothing but the tour. And those whom he loved and trusted the most were sure that this was the moment he had been waiting for. "This is real?" asked his friend Deepak Chopra, who spoke with Jackson often in the weeks before his death. "You're coming back for real?"

"For real," said Michael, laughing.

The night before he died, Jackson ran through a six-hour dress rehearsal of his concert at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. More than a dozen people who witnessed the final rehearsal – from his promoter to his choreographer to his musicians – all agree on one thing: Jackson was better than he'd ever been. He *popped*, just like he had in his glory days, singing and outdancing the young pros that surrounded him. "He was so brilliant onstage," recalls his tour director, Kenny Ortega. "I had goose bumps."

Ken Ehrlich, who has produced the Grammy Awards for three decades, sat in the audience, awed. "I turned to somebody and said, 'This is amazing!' For so many years I have watched Chris Brown and Justin Timberlake and Usher and the Backstreet Boys and En Vogue all imitate Michael Jackson – and now here we were this many years later, and he was going to do it again. I got chills, literally. The hairs on the back of my neck were raised. Those are the moments you hope for."

This Is It was to be the biggest comeback ever. "Frank," Jackson told his manager, "we've got to put on the greatest show on Earth."

The tragedy is, he almost pulled it off.

ONE DAY NEAR THE END of February, Kenny Ortega answered the phone in his home office in Sherman Oaks, California, and heard a soft, familiar falsetto on the other end of the line. "Kenny," the caller said, "it's Michael."

Right away, Ortega heard something in Jackson's voice that had been missing for a long time: excitement. The two had become friends in the early 1990s, when Ortega choreographed Michael's *Dangerous* tour, and they worked together again on the *HIStory* tour. Following his acquittal on child-molestation charges in 2005, Jackson had largely dropped out of touch with his friends in the music business. But now, as Jackson described the comeback tour he was putting together, Ortega heard a focus in the star that had been absent for years. Michael sounded sharp and clear as he told Ortega that he wanted this to be the most spectacular show in music history. "This is it," Jackson said, echoing what would eventually become the tour's title.

> Under the harsh light of the morgue, Jackson's face looked porcelain, impeccable. "Seeing him lying there," recalls an eyewitness, "he looked peaceful."

Only the summer before, Michael had seemed a broken man. Photographers had captured him as he was pushed around in the baking Las Vegas sun in a wheelchair, wearing a surgical mask and pajamas. It was hard not to look at those photos and wonder what happened to the man who had once danced in his sparkly socks and gloves as if he controlled gravity. These days he looked like a creature from some other world, ungoverned by logic and vulnerable to everything.

Jackson had moved to Vegas after returning from the Middle East in 2006, taking up residence with his children in a 10-bedroom mansion west of the Strip. Jack Wishna, a wheeler and dealer in the gaming industry who had lobbied Donald Trump to open a resort in town, was trying to help Michael land a series of shows in Vegas that could pay off his mounting debts, but the deal wasn't going well. Wishna would later tell CNN that the singer seemed "drugged up" and "incoherent" and was often so weak that he needed a wheelchair to get around. Jackson and his children rarely left the mansion, except for shopping excursions. When they did go out, the kids wore feather-and-

Contributing editor CLAIRE HOFFMAN *wrote about Amy Winehouse in RS 1056.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: EDDIE MORALES/FAME PICTURES

FUNERAL FOR A KING Pallbearers at Jackson's July 7th memorial service included his brothers Jermaine and Tito.

WALLY SKALIJ/UPI/LANDOV

mesh masks to shield them from photographers, their father by their side in his odd uniforms from some imaginary army, replete with epaulets and armbands. The Vegas shows were eventually canceled because of Jackson's condition, Wishna said. Around that same time, Jackson's sister Janet reportedly tried to stage an intervention with Michael to curb his drug use but failed.

By that point, Jackson had been spiraling downward for years. The breaking point had come as he was driven home in a motorcade on June 13th, 2005, just after his acquittal on 10 counts of child molestation and related claims. The mood in the car was subdued. Arriving at Neverland Ranch, Jackson went upstairs and turned to Dick Gregory, a comedian and family friend who had known Michael since he starred in *The Wiz*. Jackson grabbed Gregory and clutched him tightly. "Don't leave me," he begged. "They're trying to kill me."

Gregory had the feeling that Jackson was referring to the whole world. Michael seemed paranoid and dehydrated. "Have you eaten?" Gregory asked him, knowing that Jackson often went without food for days.

"I can't eat," Jackson responded. "They're trying to poison me."

"Do me a favor," Gregory told him. "Get out of here. All of these people have double-crossed you."

As melodramatic as it sounds, Gregory may have been right. Jackson had long lived in an alternate world of yes men who seemed to come and go, alternately bilking the singer or accusing Michael of bilking them. Not even his family seemed to be able to get past this world of opportunism. By the time of his molestation trial, this circle had grown increasingly shady. There was Marc Schaffel, a former gay-porn producer who advised Jackson for years, and Al Malnik, a lawyer who reportedly once represented mobster Meyer Lansky. There were two German "entrepreneurs" who managed to get Jackson to endorse a sports cola, known only as "Mystery Drink," which was briefly sold during the *HIStory* tour. And there was his security detail from the Nation of Islam, which was rumored to have come to blows with several of Jackson's brothers who had expressed concern over the Nation's growing sway over Michael's life.

Jackson knew he had to get out – but his choice of a savior only made things weirder. That June, to help him resolve his finances and escape the glare of the media spotlight, Jackson turned to a man he had never met: Sheik Abdullah bin Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, a prince of Bahrain. The sheik had befriended Michael's brother Jermaine, who had converted to Islam and spent four months living in Bahrain. Now Abdullah helped pay off some $2.2 million in legal fees for Michael, and by the end of the month, Jackson – with his three young children and staff in tow – went to live with the prince. There were rumors of private shows for the sheik. Abdullah, who had musical aspirations of his own, later said that he and Michael were working on a record together.

Even then, Jackson was dreaming of a comeback. "A tour was always in the works," says Miko Brando, the son of legendary actor Marlon Brando, who spoke to Michael on the phone during the singer's time in Bahrain. "It was just to get himself ready to go back to work and be productive. Michael is too much of a perfectionist just to sit around and not do anything. He was always creating music, creating ideas. He knew how to put things together, what worked, what the public was hungry for."

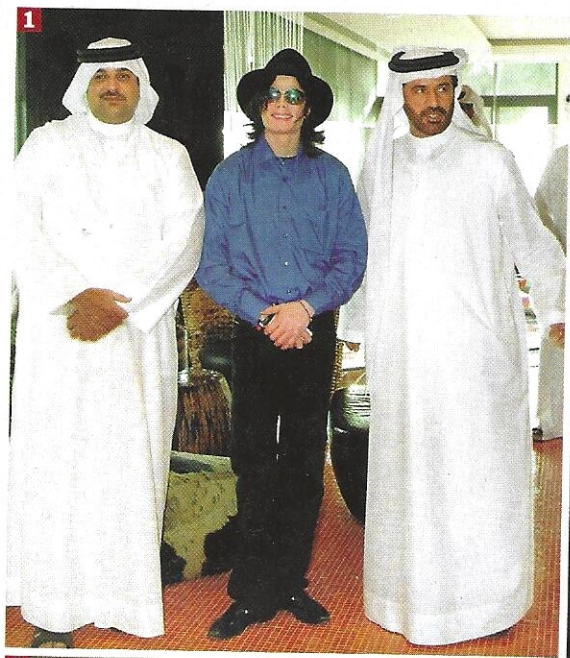
As always, though, things seemed to go wrong quickly. After Jackson left Bahrain in 2006, Abdullah filed suit against the singer, claiming that he had spent enormous sums on Jackson – from renting a palatial home to buying him body lotions and a Ferrari – in the expecta-

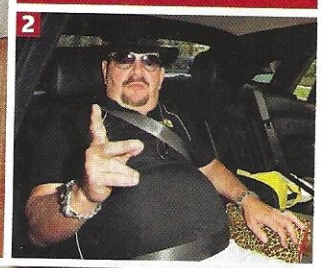
tion that Michael would record an album of songs he had written. Jackson fled to Ireland, where he continued to work on music [see "Michael Jackson's Unheard Music," page 49]. But he never released any songs.

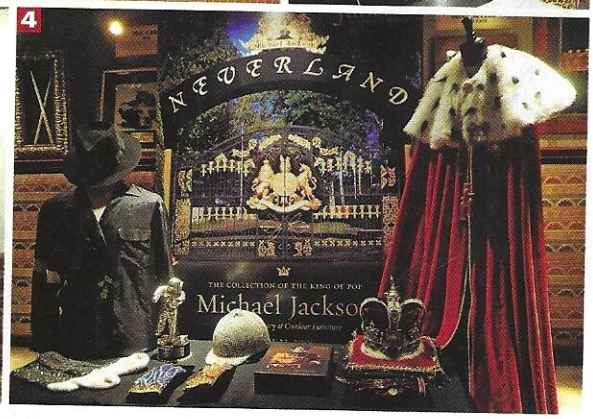
In the summer of 2007, Jackson was contacted by AEG, one of the world's leading concert presenters. The company was about to open the O_2, an 18,000-seat arena on the banks of the Thames River in eastern London, and it needed someone with the star power to fill it. Randy Phillips, the CEO of AEG Live, was friendly with Jackson from the 1980s, when they had worked together on a deal for the sneaker company LA Gear. Phillips flew to Las Vegas to meet with Jackson and his advisers, and they sat down for dinner in the private wine cellar of a luxury condo complex.

Jackson arrived in sunglasses and a hat, but he seemed disengaged as Phillips made his pitch for a series of shows at the O_2 arena. "He was listening," recalls Phillips. "He wasn't excited." Jackson said he loved the long-running show that Celine Dion had been doing in Vegas, and he was interested in doing something similar. But not long after the meeting, Phillips got a call from Raymone Bain, one of Jackson's advisers at the time, who said the star wasn't ready to perform again, let alone commit to an arduous, ongoing series of concerts.

Then in October 2007, creditors began foreclosure proceedings on Jackson's beloved Neverland. "He didn't think about money – it wasn't his motivator," says Phillips. "Which may have been why he spent so much."







Michael's Circle

(1) In 2005, Jackson moved to Bahrain to live with Sheik Abdullah (left), who paid off $2.2 million of his legal fees. **(2)** Dr. Arnold Klein, whom Jackson visited days before his death. **(3)** Dr. Conrad Murray wanted $1 million a month to be Jackson's physician. **(4)** Items from the aborted Neverland auction.

Last year, with the concerts off the table, Jackson turned to Wall Street to bail him out. Given a spending habit that some said had hit $35 million a year, Jackson had sustained his lavish lifestyle by taking out a reported $270 million in loans from Bank of America, much of it secured by his Neverland Ranch and his stake in the Sony/ATV publishing catalog, which includes the music of the Beatles and the Jonas Brothers. But Bank of America had sold the loan package to Fortress Investments, a New York firm that specializes in distressed debt. Fortress was well-connected, and it knew how to take advantage of other people's misfortune. In 2007, presidential candidate John Edwards, who worked as a consultant for the firm, was forced to withdraw $16 million he had invested in Fortress after news reports revealed that it was buying up distressed properties in New Orleans and foreclosing on families hard hit by Hurricane Katrina.

In March 2008, Jackson announced that he had made a deal with Fortress – which at one point was reportedly charging him 20 percent interest on his old loans – to stop the firm's foreclosure proceedings on Neverland. But the deal never materialized. Instead, Michael took the advice of someone he had just met: Tohme Tohme, a Lebanese financier from Los Angeles. According to Tohme, he was contacted last year by Michael's brother Jermaine, who asked if he could help save Neverland from foreclosure. The two flew to Las Vegas and met with Michael, who put his trust in Tohme. The financier quickly persuaded his friend Tom Barrack, the billionaire CEO of Colony Capital, to meet with Jackson.

Barrack, whose investment fund owns the Las Vegas Hilton and dozens of other resorts and casinos, prides himself on his "cautious contrarianism," which he defines as "investing in out-of-favor sectors or markets to exploit capital or product misalignments." If ever a sector was out of favor or misaligned, it was Michael Jackson – and Barrack had the resources to rescue him from Fortress.

In May 2008, Colony and Jackson staved off foreclosure on Neverland by forming a holding company to own the property jointly, with the two as partners. They reverted to calling it by its pre-Jackson name, Sycamore Valley Ranch, and immediately started renovation work, most likely with an eye toward selling it. Tohme, seeming to think he could turn the chaos of Jackson's life into a sound investment, also made a deal with Julien's auction house in Los Angeles to sell off the contents of Neverland. Darren Julien, the auctioneer, spent months working with the Jackson camp, carefully cataloging the immense contents of the 2,700-acre ranch. "It was like Disneyland collides with the Louvre," says Julien. "Only in Neverland could you see an 18th-century statue next to a monumental castle next to a statue of butlers and maids." But this spring, the auction came to an abrupt halt when one of Jackson's own companies filed suit against Julien's, claiming it had not consented to the sale. The sudden reversal underscored what many in Jackson's world had long known: that Jackson was surrounded by competing advisers, and that who was in or out of favor seemed to change on a whim.

If Jackson wasn't going to sell off his stuff from Neverland, he would have to find another way to raise money. Last fall, Barrack sat down with Phillips and described Colony's plans for restructuring the mess that was Jackson's money. In November, Jackson flew to Los An-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: REUTERS/LANDOV; SPLASH NEWS; EZIO PETERSEN/UPI/LANDOV; "HOUSTON CHRONICLE"/AP IMAGES

geles from his home in Vegas and met with Phillips at the Bel-Air Hotel. Once again, they spoke about the possibility of a comeback – but this time, Michael seemed keenly interested.

As he and Phillips spoke for hours, Jackson opened up about everything he wanted. He talked about making movies that he would star in and direct. He had already spent millions on one – *Ghosts*, a short, family-friendly horror film starring himself and based on a screenplay he had commissioned from Stephen King. He wanted to make another album. And he wanted to tour. But more than anything, Phillips recalls, Jackson wanted to be able to show his kids what he did, what made people on the street mob him when he left the house.

"He wanted people to see his work and not just talk about his lifestyle," says Phillips. "Michael was a very smart marketing person. People say he was feeble and manipulated, but he was powerful and a manipulator. He was ready. He wanted to clean up his finances." Jackson told the promoter that he wanted to pay off his debts so he could buy a house in Las Vegas that he had fallen in love with, one that belonged to the Sultan of Brunei. It would be his new Neverland. "He was ready to stop living like a vagabond and settle down and earn money again," says Phillips. "He wasn't stupid – he knew there wasn't a fairy godmother coming. The house and making movies were huge to him."

After the meeting, Phillips debriefed the owner of AEG, Phil Anschutz. "I believe Michael needs to do this financially," Phillips told his boss. "And he's ready to do this emotionally. He's ready to get back on the horse." Jackson agreed to kick off a worldwide comeback tour with 31 performances at the O_2 arena, beginning on July 8th. According to Phillips, the number of shows wasn't arbitrary – Jackson chose it so he would have 10 more shows than Prince, who had opened the arena with a series of spectacular concerts in 2007. Michael, it seems, had been engaged in his own private competition with Prince since 1987, when Prince refused to perform a duet with him on "Bad." Two decades later, Jackson was still eager to upstage his rival and remind the world who was King.

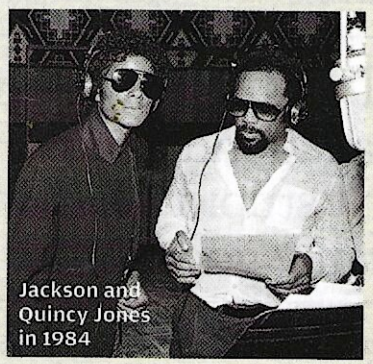
In February of this year, after reaching a deal with AEG, Jackson made a number of calls to old friends and associates whom he had let go or fired over the years. "It was the old team," says Ortega. Frank DiLeo, who had been pushed out of Jackson's inner circle two decades earlier, was brought back as manager, along with choreographer Travis Payne and longtime lawyer John Branca, who had helped Jackson buy his stake in the Sony/ATV catalog and the rights to all his masters. "He understood that he would be working toward financial freedom, and he was very excited about that," says DiLeo. "It encouraged him – he knew he was working toward something."

Michael Jackson's Unheard Music

Inside his final recordings – and the hundreds of unreleased tracks from his vault

IN DEATH, MICHAEL JACKSON FINALLY achieved the comeback he so desperately wanted: He is once again the hottest recording artist on the planet. In the two and a half weeks after his passing, Jackson sold more than 2.3 million albums, according to Nielsen SoundScan, and occupies the top 12 slots on *Billboard*'s pop-catalog album chart. And his death will pose little impediment to the release of more music: Jackson was at work on both a new pop album and a collection of classical-style instrumentals, and there are also untold numbers of outtakes in the vaults.

In the years since his last studio album, 2001's *Invincible*, Jackson recorded new songs with that album's co-producer, Rodney Jerkins, as well as with Will.i.am, Akon and Ne-Yo. Jerkins says that he finished 10 new songs with Jackson, including a couple that reprised the anti-media themes of 1987's "Leave Me Alone." He says Jackson, who feuded with his record label, Epic, hoped to release the new album independently.



Jackson and Quincy Jones in 1984

Will.i.am worked on five songs with the singer – one, "I'm Gonna Miss You," Jackson wrote in the wake of James Brown's 2006 death. They tried out songs in various styles, including one inspired by Estelle's 2008 hit "American Boy" and another in the style of the Jacksons' "Can You Feel It." "It was music that made us dance and made us feel good," says Will.i.am.

Akon recorded extensively with Jackson over a period of months, working on songs that touched on social issues such as poverty and AIDS. But Akon says most of the material was left unfinished – Jackson told Akon he wanted to put his recording projects aside while he prepared for his 50 shows at London's O_2 arena. "He wanted to just be patient and come with the right concepts and the right songs for his new comeback," says Akon.

Jackson was also at work on his first album of instrumental music, collaborating with film composer David Michael Frank on two eight-to-10-minute classical-style pieces. Jackson intended to have the music, which Frank describes as "almost like a film score," recorded with an 80-piece orchestra.

Then there's Jackson's extensive library of outtakes: "Every time that he recorded, he over-recorded," says former Sony Music CEO Tommy Mottola. "He would record anywhere from 20 to 30 songs for each album. Any of them could have been as big a hit as the ones that came out." Among the outtakes is a song from the *Thriller* sessions called "Don't Be Messin' Around."

Longtime engineer Bruce Swedien and Jackson also recorded experimental material: "I have a whole bunch of reels of tape that we just called 'unusual sounds,'" says Swedien. "Our idea was to eventually put them together and make them into music tracks." Even Jackson's earliest outtakes are likely to be heard – employees for Universal Music Group, which owns the rights to the Jackson 5's Motown work, are already digging through the archives.

"Any new work or compiled old work will be extremely commercially viable," says Mottola. "And don't forget, as a result of his death, kids who have really only heard about him before are becoming a whole new wave of Michael Jackson fans. You're going to have new audiences listening, buying and dancing to Michael Jackson's music for decades to come."

Brian Hiatt and Steve Knopper, with reporting by Shirley Halperin

POLARIS

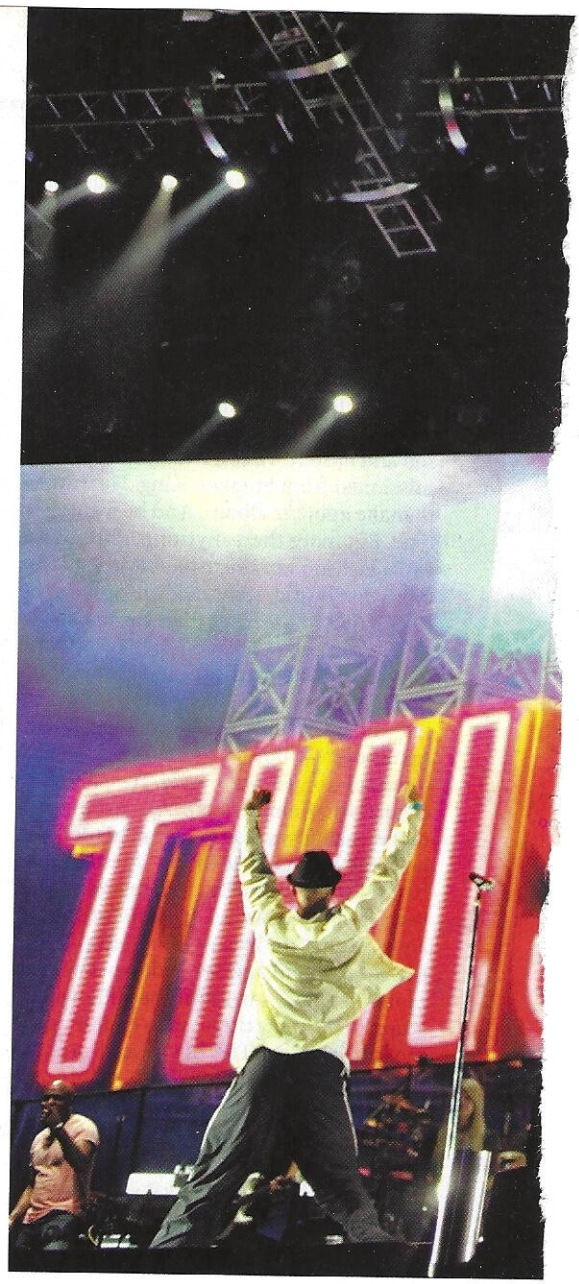
For AEG, booking Jackson for a series of concerts at the O_2 arena was a huge gamble. The insurance costs alone were monumental, and everyone knew that Jackson did nothing on the cheap. As part of the deal, AEG set up a million-dollar development fund for creating a movie version of "Thriller," which Michael was eager to produce. But despite the costs, the potential upside was huge: What if AEG could do the impossible and bring Michael Jackson back to the world? "People told me I was crazy, that I would get my heart broken by him," says Phillips. "But I just believed in him. How many times in your career do you get to touch greatness? I thought it was worth the risk."

IN MARCH, WITHIN HOURS OF Jackson telling a screaming mass of fans in London that he was preparing for what he called his "final curtain call," more than 1.6 million people signed up to buy tickets. Given the numbers, Phillips called Tohme, who over the past year had become Jackson's principal spokesman, and asked if the pop star might consider adding more shows to the schedule. How could they limit themselves to 31, Phillips asked, when there was so much money waiting to be made?

land and Sweden just to catch a glimpse of Jackson, even if it was only a hand waved through the window of one of his two blue Escalades. Some of them would tail Jackson to Beverly Hills, where he regularly visited his longtime dermatologist, Dr. Arnold Klein.

Klein's office is where, in the mid-1980s, Jackson met Debbie Rowe, his second wife and the mother of his two oldest children, Prince Michael and Paris. Klein, who declined to comment for this story, has said that he was treating Jackson for vitiligo, a skin condition that causes pigmentation loss, and working to help rebuild his damaged nose. Klein has insisted that he did not overmedicate Jackson, saying he sedated the singer only during painful medical procedures.

Some days when Jackson left Klein's office, he seemed drowsy and out of it. "It's not a good day for him," his security guards would tell the assembled well-wishers. "He's tired." But some longtime fans weren't buying it. "Sometimes the guards would say that he just went to the doctor and he's on medication," says one die-hard fan. The fan says Jackson visited Klein the Monday before he died, when Michael's security detail brought him to the dermatologist's office at 9 a.m. – an early-morning



"Michael was ready to stop living like a vagabond," says Phillips. "He wasn't stupid – he knew there wasn't a fairy godmother coming."

Jackson called back 20 minutes later and told Phillips he would do 50 shows – as long as AEG did two things for him. First, he wanted to be provided with an English country estate with rolling hills, greenery and horses for the kids. Second, he wanted a ceremony held at the end of the tour to commemorate some as-yet-to-be-defined accomplishment by Jackson for the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It was the two, seemingly contradictory things that he had striven for his entire life: to live in seclusion, surrounded by children and animals, and to be recognized as the greatest performer in history.

By that point, Jackson had moved his family to Los Angeles, renting a seven-bedroom, $38 million château in the Holmby Hills from Hubert Guez, the CEO of luxury T-shirt maker Ed Hardy. After signing a lease for $100,000 a month, Jackson settled into a routine of sorts, going out mainly at night. But it didn't take long before the fans and paparazzi tracked him down and set up vigil outside his new home. Every day a dozen or so people waited outside, some who had come from as far away as Switzer-

mission seemingly scheduled to avoid detection by fans and paparazzi.

According to one source, Jackson also had a rampant eBay addiction, staying up late at night to make purchases on one of the numerous accounts he maintained. He also went on secretive shopping expeditions in L.A., taking his kids to the Ed Hardy store in West Hollywood to check out the clothing maker's wares, or to an antique shop he loved called Off the Wall. Sometimes he would just take the kids out with his security detail and drive. Despite being a purported health nut, he would sometimes stop for Kentucky Fried Chicken along the way.

But for the first time in years, Jackson had a show to focus on. In March, auditions for the comeback tour began at CenterStaging, one of the primary rehearsal spaces in Los Angeles. From the start, Michael took a hands-on role in the shaping the show, urging those around him to conduct a sort of intergalactic talent search. "Think about the greatest artists and dancers in the world," he told Ortega. "Let's find them."

More than 5,000 dancers applied, and Ortega and his team narrowed it down to 700. The final auditions were held at the Nokia Theater in Hollywood, where the Academy Awards take place. Jackson was there, sitting next to Ortega, fully focused. "Let's get closer," he told the choreographer. "I want to see their eyes." When he spotted a promising dancer, he'd say, "That one there, the girl on the end – she's so beautiful."

At the end of March, just three months before the first concert was scheduled to kick off, a crew of dozens of musicians and dancers and technicians began showing up for daily rehearsals at CenterStaging – putting in long days, seven days a week. In the beginning, Jackson would show up only a few times a week, sitting with Ortega for several hours and going through his huge archive of material – old photographs, videos, records. They were hoping to capture that essence, that special something that made him the King of Pop.

Jackson was determined to give the fans everything they wanted. He had ordered a website set up so fans could vote for which

FINAL CURTAIN Jackson at a dress rehearsal two days before his death. "He had that glow, that swagger," says the show's musical director. "He's got amazing muscle memory."

KEVIN MAZUR/AEG VIA GETTY IMAGES

songs he would perform, and it was from that forum that he and Ortega began compiling a 30-song session list. Jackson, who had a lifelong interest in magic, seemed eager to blow people's minds.

"When the show opens, I don't want to hold anything back," he told Ortega. "I want this to be the most spectacular opening the audience has ever seen. They have to ask themselves, 'How are they going to top that?' I don't even care if they're applauding. I want their jaws on the ground. I want them to not be able to sleep, because they are so amped up from what they saw."

To get in shape for the grueling tour, Jackson started working out a few times a week with Lou Ferrigno, from the TV show *The Incredible Hulk*. The two had met years earlier at a party, when Ferrigno noticed Jackson staring at him from across the room, recognizing him as the Hulk. "He was like a kid," says Ferrigno, who would arrive in the morning to be greeted by Jackson's children racing around the house, playing games.

Jackson was painfully thin – although pushing six feet, he weighed only 127 pounds – and he'd suffered several injuries over the years. He and Ferrigno would go to a backroom that was equipped with a treadmill. Jackson didn't want to build muscle, so they worked out gently, stretching with a rubber band and an exercise ball. Jackson wore black tuxedo pants, a black T-shirt, black shoes and black socks while he worked out, so he wouldn't have to change when he went to rehearsals afterward. "He was a hoot," says Ferrigno. "Many years ago he told me he was extremely lonely. But when I was with him he looked very fulfilled and happy. He was like Mr. Mom."

Jackson clearly loved being at home with his children, and he often engaged in his own childlike antics. "He was a jokester," says Ferrigno. "He'd call my phone, sometimes disguising his voice for 10 minutes. I was thinking I had a stalker. He would say his name was Omar and that he was looking for me."

But "Omar" did more than play pranks on his friends. According to TMZ, Jackson also used the name to fill prescriptions for the cornucopia of painkillers and sedatives he was taking. In 2007, a Beverly Hills pharmacy called Mickey Fine filed a complaint against Jackson for not paying his bill for prescriptions – a total of $101,926.66, dating back to 2005. Court documents from the investigation into child-molestation charges against Jackson included interviews with two former Neverland staffers who reported that Jackson regularly took as many as 40 Xanax a night in order to sleep.

Although Jackson was playing a central role in shaping the comeback tour, taking the stage to prepare was another matter entirely. While the crew logged long hours at Center-Staging, Jackson preferred to work from home most days. Those around him were getting nervous. According to Phillips, AEG's initial budget of $12 million for preproduction had more than doubled. But when the promoter pressed Jackson on the $150,000 a month he had agreed to pay Dr. Murray, Michael rebuffed him sternly. "Look," Jackson said, "my body is the mechanism that fuels this entire

business. Like President Obama, I need my own personal physician attending to me 24/7."

Others began to press Jackson to rehearse more. "I had my concerns if he was ready, and I questioned him," says Ortega. "There were days when I was like, 'Are you going to show up? Are you really going to be here? You need to do this.'" Citing the need for more setup time in London, Ortega asked for the opening show to be pushed back five days, to July 13th.

In early June, Dr. Murray mediated a meeting at Michael's home between Jackson and Ortega, who felt the star needed to come to rehearsals more often. Jackson listened quietly to the tour director, but he didn't seem alarmed. "I know my schedule," he said calmly. "Just trust me."

But after that, Jackson started coming to rehearsals all day, every day. To those around him, he seemed focused and attentive to every detail. "I like to refer to Michael as a gamer," says DiLeo. "He's the quarterback. He's the star of the team, and in practice, quarterbacks are easygoing. But game day, he's turning it on."

"He was rusty in the beginning, sure, he'd miss some notes," says the show's musical director, Michael Bearden. "But he would always say, 'That's why we rehearse.' And the last two or three rehearsals, he was ready to do that show. He knew it, he had that glow, that swagger about him. MJ is the master closer. He's got amazing muscle memory. When he gets in front of his fans up on that stage, it's just magic."

At rehearsals, Jackson quickly took charge. Orianthi Panagaris, a guitarist who performed with Carrie Underwood at this year's Grammys, recalls coming in for an audition and being told to play "Beat It." Jackson sat in front of her on a couch. "I was so nervous," she says. "From the couch he told me to crank up my solo. He was clapping at the end, he was really happy. He came over to me and grabbed my arm, and started walking me up and down the front of the stage area. He said, 'When you're playing the solo, I want you to chase me!'"

Still, some around Jackson were concerned about his heavy reliance on prescription drugs. "I became aware of it in 2005," says Deepak Chopra. "I brought it up with him many times. His assistant would call frequently about it, saying he was being given medication by a lot of doctors. He would go to great lengths to get it – if one doctor didn't give it to him, he'd try another. It was an addiction that was created and perpetuated by doctors."

For the most part, nights seemed to be the biggest problem for Jackson – he had complained of insomnia for years. But it was also the time when he felt a higher power was channeling creativity to him. "I didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night," he would tell Ortega. "I was up working on music. That's when the information is coming, and when it's coming you gotta work."

"Michael," Ortega joked with him, "why can't you make a pact with your higher power so that you could put these ideas on the shelf until after July 13th?"

"No," Jackson responded. "Then he might give them to Prince."

Despite his workouts with Ferrigno, Jackson remained thin, almost emaciated. "I was concerned about his weight," says Phillips. "When I started with him, he was a little heavier – heavy for him might have been 130 pounds. He was like the absentminded professor – he would get so engaged in the creation of the show that he'd forget to eat. To the point where Kenny Ortega used to cut up his chicken breast and feed him broccoli, like a kid, as they worked. I actually brought an associate of mine to just remind him to eat, stuff like that."

Part of Michael's inspiration for the tour was his concern about global warming. Three weeks before his death, Jackson sent Chopra a CD, hand-delivered to his home in Carlsbad, California. "The music is a very soft, mellow piece," says Chopra. "It's called 'Breed.' He wanted to do a song about the environment, and he wanted me to help him with the lyrics. There were big ideas behind the lyrics – how the trees are our lungs, the Earth is our body."

Indeed, Jackson's worldview seemed to have incubated and grown during his time off the stage. During rehearsals, he often talked about what was going on in the world. "He'd built up a big arsenal of things he wanted to communicate," says Ortega, who found Jackson to be surprisingly engaged in politics and the environment. "He felt time was running out, and he really wanted to dig in and participate. He'd say, 'Do you know this about the rain forest?' or 'Let's bring in Norman Lear and Deepak. Who else do you know?'"

Sometimes those ideas were expensive. Those who worked on the show say they never saw any sign of the financial pressure Jackson was under. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy spending money as much as ever. Ortega recalls he often had to keep Jackson's dreams in check. "You want us to go to Victoria Falls and shoot the waterfall from a helicopter?" he'd say to Jackson, who wanted the video for the show's closing number. "Do you know how much that costs?" But Jackson didn't seem to care. "Money was not his motivating factor," says Phillips. "It was just doing something greater than anyone else had ever done before. That's what motivated him."

On the last night of his life, Jackson arrived at the Staples Center for six hours of a full run-through. First he had a meeting with Phillips, AEG president Tim Leiweke, his manager DiLeo and Grammy producer Ken Ehrlich. They were going over ideas for a Halloween special they were putting together: the network debut of *Ghosts*, Jackson's short film, which would incorporate clips of a live performance of "Thriller" from London. Afterward, Jackson went into another room and spent about an hour going over the 3-D effects for the show. He ate dinner, chicken breast and broccoli. Then he went to his dressing room and came out for three hours of performance.

> "When the show opens, I don't want to hold anything back," Michael told his tour director. "I don't care if they're applauding – I want their jaws on the ground."

The closer was slated as "Earth Song," from *HIStory*, one of Jackson's favorites. An impassioned ballad about the state of the world, it ended with a repeated refrain asking about the victims of humanity's rampant and heedless development, from crying whales to ravaged forests. "What about death again?" Jackson sang at the ballad's conclusion. "Do we give a damn?"

Those who witnessed the performance – seasoned professionals who had worked with the best in the business – were awestruck. Standing before them was the Michael they all remembered, the artist who had grown from a child singer to forge a whole new style of pop. When Jackson walked off the stage, he hugged DiLeo. "This is our time again," he told his manager. "It's time for us to take it back."

The rehearsal was over, but no one wanted to break the spell by leaving. "He was bioluminescent," recalls Ortega. "When he finished, we all stayed there, just messing around." Michael was ready. In only 19 more days, he would take the stage in London, and the world would know, once again, that the King of Pop was back.

Finally, as the performers started to drift away, Phillips walked Jackson to his car. Michael put his arm around the promoter. "Thank you for getting me this far," he told Phillips in that whisper of a voice. "I can take it from here. I know I can do this." ●

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Confessions of an Unapologetic Pop Star

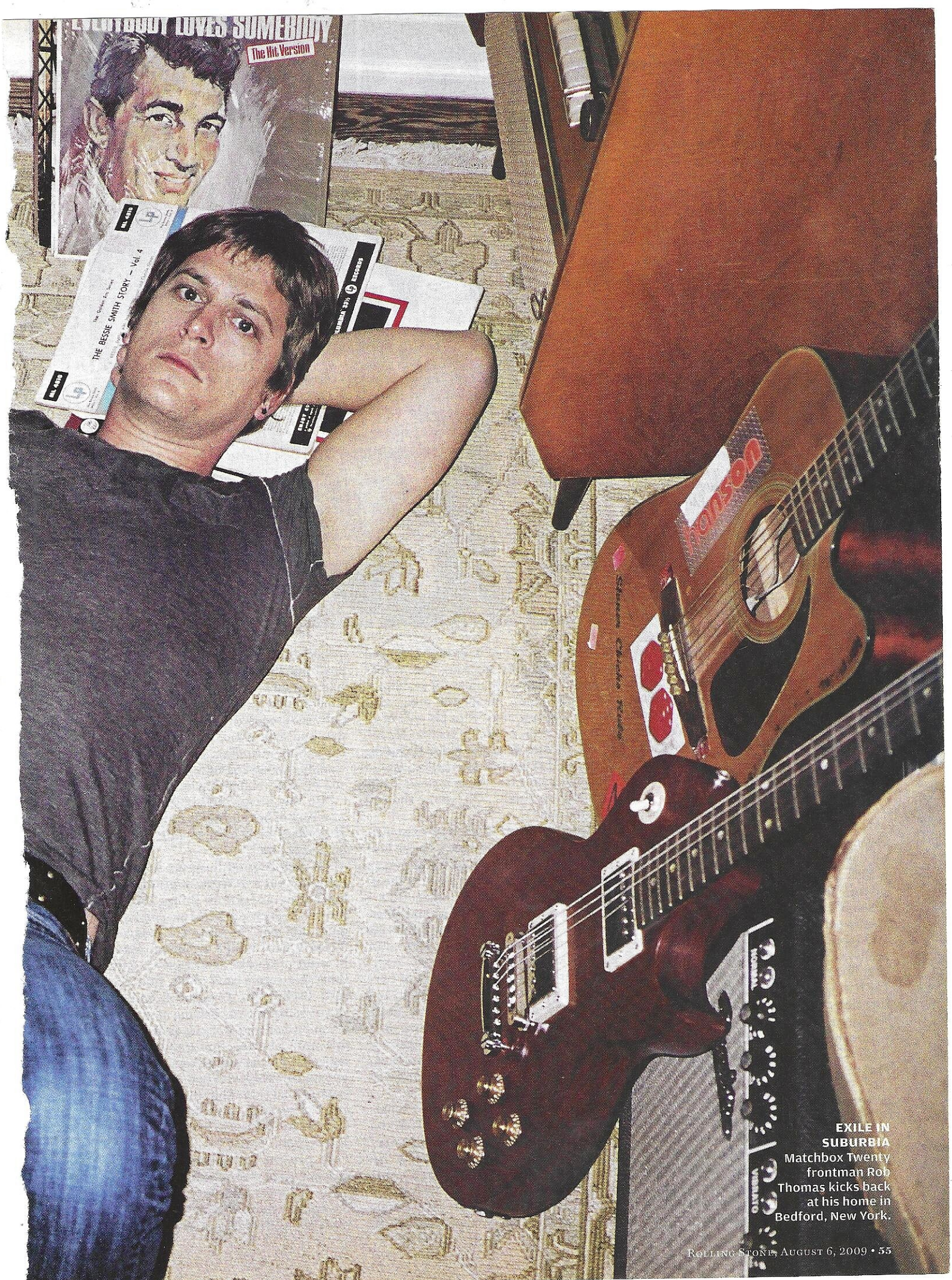
How did Rob Thomas survive a violent redneck childhood to become one of the top songwriters of his generation?

BY ERIK HEDEGAARD

BECAUSE HE ISN'T ALlowed to smoke inside his house, Rob Thomas, 37, shuffles out back to a covered patio, his dogs fumbling around underfoot, where he lights up an American Spirit, smokes it almost down to the filter, wrestles with a few things that are on his mind and says, finally, "This is the road I'm on, and there is no other road."

By that, he could mean the same road he's been on for the past 16 years, both with his band, Matchbox Twenty, and on his own, creating sparkly pop music that actually strikes a chord with people at a time when the world is very short on bona fide pop stars. His six-album total has yielded a ridiculous number of Top 10 singles – 19 in all, including "Long Day" (the first, in 1996), "Bent" (the first to go gold, in 2000), "Lonely No More" (his first as a solo performer) and, of course, "Smooth," his monster Latin-tinged 1999 collaboration with Carlos Santana, which earned him three Grammys, spent 12 big weeks at the top of *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart and eventually began to wear on even its most hardcore fans. As a perform-

PHOTOGRAPH BY THEO WENNER



EXILE IN SUBURBIA
Matchbox Twenty frontman Rob Thomas kicks back at his home in Bedford, New York.

er, his approach has always been the same. He writes the songs, records the songs, goes on tour behind the songs, says a few words to the press, and other than that, you don't hear much from him. "I'm married, I'm not fucking anybody else, I'm not hitting anybody, I'm not out there," Thomas says. "My songs are more famous than I am, and I'm OK with that."

Along the way, however, he has picked up his share of detractors, who constantly carp about how syrupy his lyrics can be. To them, his music is "corporate-radio fluff" and not worth further consideration. At the same time, they also tend to write off Thomas himself, as if he too is fluff. Plus, he's been called "the rock star next door," which about says it all. *Feh.*

But here's the thing. For the most part, Thomas has kept his personal life and his past to himself. He's coughed up a few things about an alcoholic grandmother, stealing cars, dropping out of high school, a fondness for coke, cigs, pot, acid and booze. But it's been a hodgepodge of facts. It's almost like he doesn't want people to get too close a look. "I've always believed, and still believe, that it's nobody's business," he says.

On the other hand, with the release of *Cradlesong,* his latest and most personal album, he would like to start opening up a little more. For one thing, he thinks the conventional wisdom about him is superficial at best. "Like, I've got this thing that I'm the nicest guy in rock," he says. "Well, because I'm Southern, I am polite. But I also have a switch, and the second that switch goes, I completely go to 'Fuck you.' If I'm angry with you, I'll go for the first thing I know about you that will hurt you. In a heartbeat. If you want to be a dick, I can be a dick, and I will go dick to dick."

He pauses, thinking this over.

"I guess I'm tired of being one-dimensional," he goes on. "I mean, there are these pockets in my life where I spend all day talking about myself, but it's like a Nick Hornby Top Five list – you're just giving facts – and it sometimes makes it seem like the music I make must be fake in some way or disingenuous. You're still representing yourself, but you're not really searching inside yourself. Over the past few years, ever since my mom died, I've been getting these panic attacks. The first time, I thought it was a heart attack. So I've got these weird, unresolved things within myself, and I sometimes think that it would be a helpful thing for me to unload completely."

Southern Gentleman

Thomas likens his upbringing to the backwoods lifestyle in the movie *Deliverance.* **(1)** Thomas and his sister, Melissa, who says her pop-star brother was a "nerdy little boy." **(2)** With Melissa and his mother, Mamie, whom he calls "my crazy mom, my drunk mom," in South Carolina, in 1973. **(3)** Thomas' high school yearbook photo from 1988. **(4)** With his wife, Marisol, in February.

THOMAS LIVES ABOUT AN HOUR north of Manhattan, in Bedford, New York, having moved there from overcrowded Soho. It's horse country: rolling hills, Martha Stewart, Donald Trump, lots of snooty women and their wretched once-billionaire husbands. "These people fucking hate me," Thomas says. "They hate that I do well and did it just by smoking pot, drinking beer and playing music. It makes me feel pretty good." He lives in a big, airy, French-country place with his wife of 10 years, Marisol, a former fashion model. When Thomas first met Keith Richards, he hoped that the legend might say something nice about his music; instead, Richards said leeringly, "Oh, you're the one with the wife."

She's a huge part of Thomas' existence. "We're really co-dependent – in the best way," he says. Right now, he is standing in his kitchen, texting her to see how she is. She's just upstairs, but she suffers from a lupus-like autoimmune disease and sometimes, like now, the pain is such that she prefers not to mix. It's been a lot to deal with – doctors, drugs, hair loss, terrible uncertainty, the putting off of having a child – but they've dealt with it, and the disease's influence has weighed heavily on both of Thomas' solo albums, first *...Something to Be* and now *Cradlesong,* bringing an honest intensity to them that maybe hadn't been in evidence so much before.

As it happens, when they met, Thomas was a big sport drinker (mainly Jack and tequila) and a sizable coke buff who nonetheless was 50 pounds overweight. He didn't shower, didn't brush his teeth, didn't tweeze his unibrow, did sleep with lots of women, including one who gave Thomas his only child so far, a boy, Maison, 11. "It just happens," he says. "There was no road not traveled. So, I traveled it and had a good time, and then, around the time it began to seem ridiculous, I met my wife." He proposed a month after their first date and since then has curtailed most of his habits, including, he says, his long-standing and fabled fondness for pot, such was Marisol's stabilizing influence.

"He was occupying himself," Marisol says later of her husband's excesses. "Digging deeper away from anything that was bothering him."

Thomas doesn't disagree, though he prefers to put it in terms of his songwriting. "There are certain things about my life that I've never touched on, and I'm not quite sure why," he says. "I'm completely fueled by what I think my limitations are, in terms of sincerity and honesty. Everything that seems good comes from some sort of self-doubt. I'd probably be better served sometimes by looking at what I've accomplished and seeing it as that. I had this sense for a long time that we're making music for the masses and that there's something wrong with that. But one day, I woke up and said, 'Shit, I am the masses, and I'm fine with this.' But then, inevitably, you go, 'Fuck, I'm not Led Zeppelin. Led Zeppelin rocks!'"

He pauses. And then says, "What the fuck do I want? Who the fuck am I?"

Contributing editor ERIK HEDEGAARD *wrote about Hulk Hogan in RS 1077.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: GROOMING BY LORAINE ABELES. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF ROB THOMAS. 2: STEPHEN LOVEKIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR IMG; SETH POPPEL/YEARBOOK LIBRARY

THOMAS IS DOWNSTAIRS NOW, in his home studio, surrounded by recording gear. This is where he smokes his pot and writes his music. Lately it's all been for his solo efforts, but he plans on working with the rest of the Matchbox Twenty guys in the near future. It's not like they've broken up or anything. They just needed a breather.

Thomas rummages around, finds a DVD, and starts wandering toward a big flatscreen TV hanging on one wall. He puts the DVD on. "This isn't for shock value," he says. "It's just to give you an understanding." He stands back. "I don't think I've ever shared this, because it is fucking shocking."

Black-and-white images flicker to life, showing a country store and filling station that used to be on Highway 301 out to Myrtle Beach from Lake City, South Carolina, a flea-bitten tobacco-farm town. This is where Thomas lived as a child, and these are some old family home movies, circa 1977.

You see men wearing skinny ties and leisure suits, women wearing old bag dresses, Thomas' alcoholic grandmother, Maddie, who owned the store, his alcoholic mom, Mamie, who divorced his dad when Thomas was two, and then there's towheaded Rob in his pajamas, around age five, clutching a doll. Then rich Uncle Jack, who showed up in a new Cadillac and Uncle Julius, who drove a big rig; and everyone is smoking cigarettes, regardless of that baby in their lap. Then Grandma is scratching up a pot of chicken and rice from the stove. There's no sign of the pint-bottle liquor Rob's grandma sold illegally, no sign of the dope she also sold, no sign either of Aunt Monkey (as she was called), who in 1975 hired Pee Wee Gaskins, one of the most prolific and perverted serial killers in U.S. history, to kill her ex-boyfriend and then became Gaskins' lover and went to prison for the next 30 years. But then there's Rob's mom again working the Texaco pumps, and his daddy stopping by, in a nifty pantsuit, wanting his boy to say a few words into the mike, and his boy saying, "Daddy, what are you smoking?" and his dad saying, "A Kool."

Watching this, Thomas adds commentary. "Everybody sounds like Elvis, even my grandmother," he says. "And all of them look like serial killers. They were all racist. You ever see *Deliverance*? Only when I moved to Florida did it start to dawn on me that this wasn't the norm and that, oh, shit, we actually were fucking poor."

Then it's over and Thomas jumps to his feet, like he's got to get out of here quick.

In a sense, the movie hints a little at why Thomas' music is so appealing to so many; it's light on the surface, sailing along on snappy, fun-filled melodies; at the same time, it seems to be driven by darker forces percolating underneath: serial killers, doll babies and the like.

Outside near his pool, smoking, he says, "I guarantee you that anything about me that's fucked up, that's the impetus for it all, what you just saw. The first time I watched it, I began to cry. I'm living about as far removed from that as I can imagine."

For the most part, however, Thomas is an upbeat guy and great fun to hang around. He's easygoing, amusing in a self-deprecating way, a big lover of dogs, a chatterbox. He's lost his Southern accent, but, like he says, he's still Southern at heart: Enter his world and you'll never be lacking. He'll offer you a beer or maybe a snack. Then, beers in hand, he'll take you down to his studio again and fire up some bud in a THC-vaporizing Volcano machine. And all along the way, you'll find yourself treated to a kaleidoscope of opinions, thoughts, self-assessments and random witticisms.

Take the word "cunt." It's one of Thomas' favorites. "I say it only around men, but I love it," he says. "'Cunt' is in Chaucer! In Shakespeare! I say, let's bring it back!"

Or his thoughts about Stephan Jenkins from Third Eye Blind: "I don't hate him, I just don't like him. He has no soul. He's really just a cock."

Or what he thinks about the rumor that Marisol once caught him in bed with Tom Cruise: "It could have been worse, right? It could have been Fred Savage."

Or his recollections about something similar that happened to him in high school, which he dropped out of his senior year: "I had a gay friend, and we hung out, and a rumor went around that I was gay. That was kind of it for me at school. I'd become the gay kid. I mean, I've always been more sensitive and more effeminate than manly guys, so it wasn't a stretch for somebody to pull that one out. But I didn't leave school because of that. It was more because my regular life was in such disarray that going seemed ridiculous."

What he means by "regular life" is his life with his mom, or as he sometimes calls her, "my crazy mom, my drunk mom."

"I HAD A GAY FRIEND IN high school," he says. "And it was rumored that I was gay. That was it for me at school."

HE WAS BORN ON A U.S. ARMY base in Germany, the son of a sergeant, but within a few years, his parents had divorced, his mom had gone with his sister to live in Columbia, South Carolina, and Thomas had been shuttled off to Lake City, to hang out with his grandma and do what kids do in a town like that.

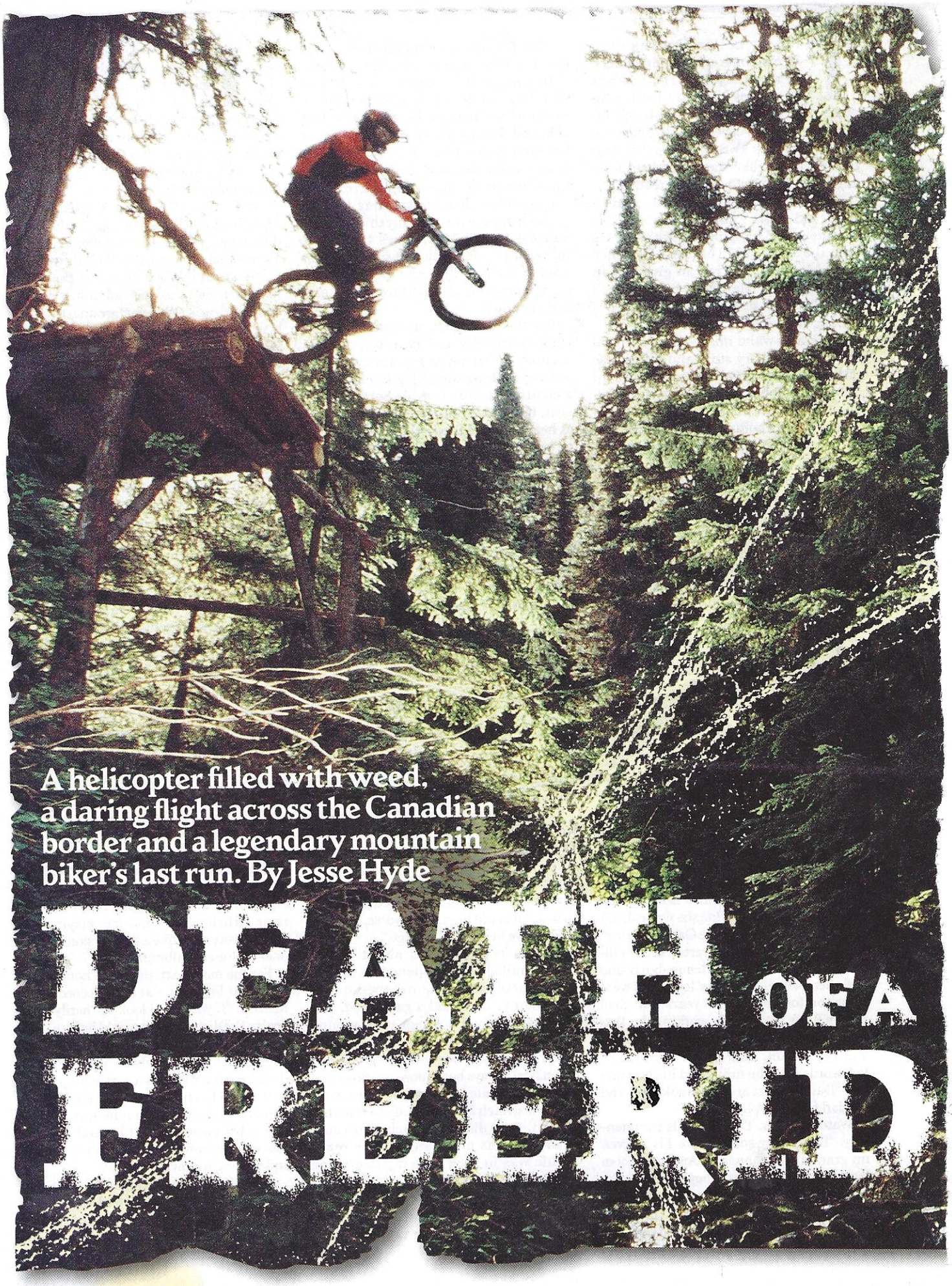
"We'd go and get dirt clods, and at night bomb the house of this neighbor we didn't like," recalls Ricky Osborne, one of Thomas' childhood pals. "We'd throw fireworks at cars. When I'd spend the night with him, we'd steal alcohol from the store and get drunk. We were around 11. Then his grandma Maddie would bring us weed. We didn't know what it was, but we'd have to pick the stems and seeds out, and then she'd give us a roll of quarters to play Frogger with. And then Maddie would go on drinking binges. Once, this guy was out front honking at her for service, so she came out and sprayed gasoline all inside his car. Another time, this guy stole from the store, and she shot him in the ass."

Though he'd come back often to visit Lake City, Thomas moved to Sarasota, Florida, with his mother and sister when he was 10. His mom was a big drinker. She hung out with bikers, and sometimes the bikers beat her up, and sometimes she would beat up on Rob, then suffer extreme guilt. Parties raged at the house, with Rob often acting as barkeep. Sometimes he'd wake up with 10 strangers sleeping off last night's booze-a-thon in the living room; he'd pick his way around the bodies, make his own breakfast, and get himself to school. His older sister, Melissa, ran away when she was 17. His mom got cancer, and Rob had to take care of her. She continued to drink, continued to smoke.

It wasn't all bad, of course. He lost his virginity when he was 14, to "a big girl – but God bless her!" He started writing and playing music around the same time, also with girls in mind: "At parties, all the football players would be drunk and passed out, and I'd be in the living room with all their girlfriends around me, playing the piano, every song like a bad version of a Lionel Richie solo album."

For the most part, though, Thomas was one great big nerd – at least according to Melissa. "If you could look up 'nerdy little boy' in the dictionary, it would be him," she says. For one thing, he carried a Vicks inhaler with him everywhere. "He'd pat it all the time, and as long as it was in his pocket, he was good," says Melissa. He got his first musical instrument when he was around 10 – a big Casio keyboard – and soon he was playing songs he heard on the radio and writing his own material.

He and his mom continued to battle, and then, at 17, he decided he'd had enough. He split, and began a two-year homeless odyssey, sleeping on friends' couches, crashing in their cars for weeks [*Cont. on 95*]



A helicopter filled with weed, a daring flight across the Canadian border and a legendary mountain biker's last run. By Jesse Hyde

DEATH OF A FREERIDER

THE THRILL SEEKER
Sam Brown riding one of the trails he built in the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia

SAM BROWN TRUDGED THROUGH THE snow, tossing the hockey bag into the helicopter. He was dressed for the cold, in insulated hiking boots and a down parka, and his breath was coming in little puffs, visible in the cold air. If he didn't hurry, he'd be flying in the dark. ♦ It was late February in the remote interior of western Canada, not far from the U.S. border. Tonight, Brown would fly $2.5 million of the world's finest marijuana, better known as B.C. Bud, to a national park near Spokane, Washington. There he would trade it with a Los Angeles-based cartel for a load of Mexican cocaine and fly back home. If all went according to plan, he'd end the night $40,000 richer. ♦ He strapped himself into the helicopter, hit the red starter switch of the Bell 206 and sat back as the smell of jet fuel filled his lungs. He had always loved the smell, and everything else about helicopters: the way the cabin shook before takeoff, the sound of the rotor blades whirring above him, the rush of excitement and dread that coursed through his body at moments like this. As he lifted off in the snow he took it all in, knowing that this could be his final run.

For the past two years, Brown had been smuggling dope across the border – but never alone, and never in conditions like this. Dark clouds hung low above the Selkirk Mountains, suggesting a storm was on its way. If it got too cold, or if it started to snow, his propeller could freeze up, sending the helicopter plummeting into the icy Columbia River.

The drug run was an insane risk, but Brown had been pushing the limits his whole life. Raised in almost primitive isolation, he had been on his own since the age of 13, living on the edge of the Canadian wilderness. People around Nelson, a town in British Columbia known as the weed capital of Canada, called him the Man From the Bush. He could start fires without a match, chop down 250-foot cedar trees and navigate the Columbia's most frightening rapids with ease. At age 24, with curly blond hair and a broad, freckled face, he was already a legend in the world of extreme mountain biking, a hardcore freerider who would try just about anything. In the summer, he took helicopter rides to the top of mountains with no known trails and rode down at a tear, often without pads or a proper helmet. He launched his bike over churning rivers, clearing 20-foot gaps, and jumped over bulldozers. Videos of his exploits circulated on the Internet and underground DVDs. He could have been famous, but he had no interest in chasing sponsorships or playing the extreme-sports game. "He had the potential to be up there with the best in the world," says Robbie Bourdon, a professional mountain biker. "He had no fear."

In the back of the chopper were 426 pounds of weed – packed into a dozen hockey bags – that likely belonged to the United Nations, a Vancouver gang that would hunt him down and kill him if he lost the load. But it wasn't just the danger that motivated Brown. He had taken the job at the last minute, despite the hazardous weather conditions, in part because he needed the money. His dad was living out of his workshop, his sister had trouble paying her bills and a woman he loved was in trouble with the feds. Tonight, Brown would take any risk necessary to help her.

As the helicopter neared the American border, Brown flew low, hugging the tree-lined ridges and jagged cliffs of the Selkirk range to avoid detection. He knew that DEA and U.S. Customs patrolled the border, sometimes with Black Hawk helicopters, and he had sketched out a route that avoided the airstrips and dirt roads they used. Not that anyone would be out tonight: The snow was coming down in flurries and the fog was closing in.

As darkness fell, Brown's BlackBerry beeped. He punched in a response. "This is the captain," he wrote. "I'm on a job and I'll be back tomorrow."

Four days later, he was dead.

SAM BROWN CAME OF AGE IN the rugged interior of British Columbia, a wild and untamed expanse that can quickly turn deadly. Every year, in logging camps accessible only by helicopter, men are maimed, crippled and killed. Skiers on backcountry trails are swallowed whole by avalanches that roar down the slopes with little or no warning, snapping towering cedars in two.

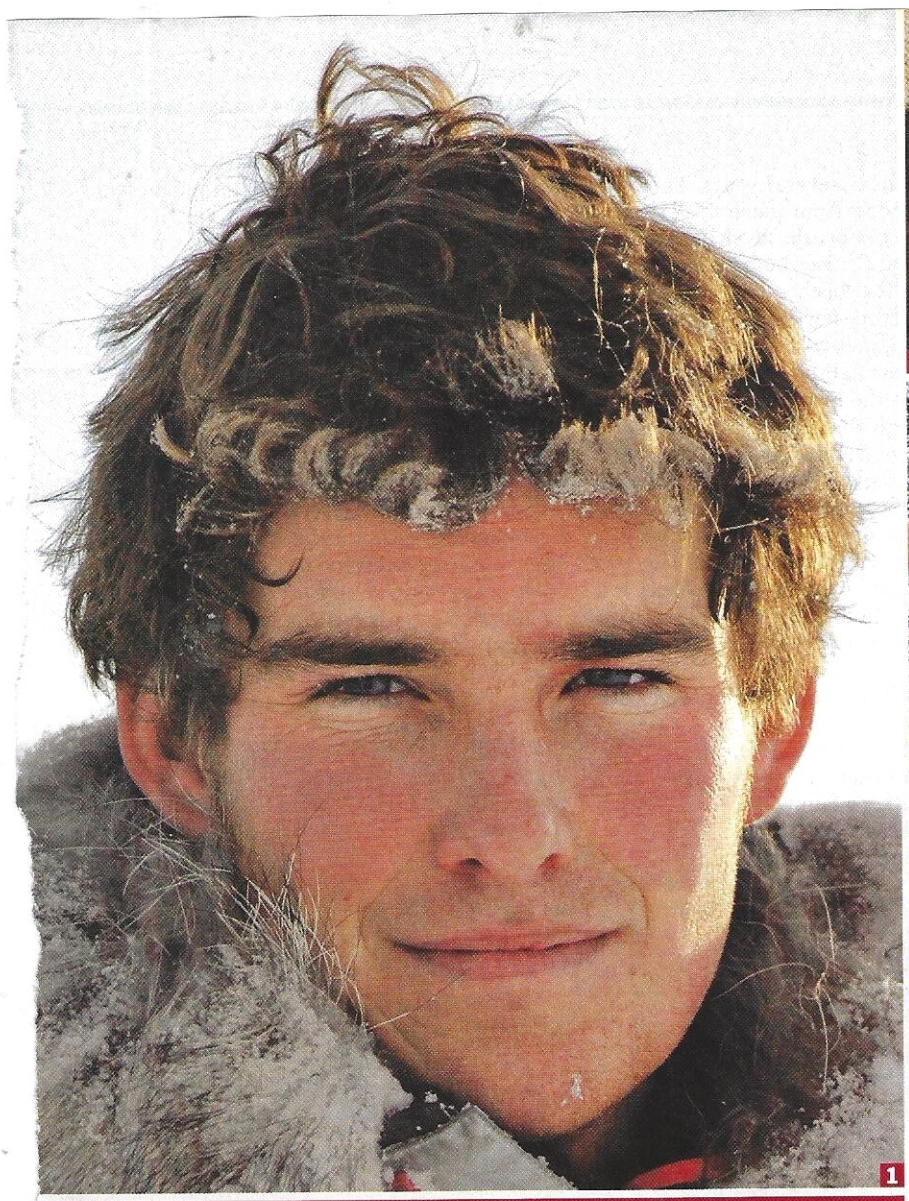
The region is known as the Kootenays, a wilderness of glacier-fed lakes and snow-capped mountains that reach 11,000 feet. More than 400 miles northeast of Seattle, the area was once home to prosperous mining towns, but now it is mostly deserted. To drive through the Slocan Valley, where Brown spent much of his time, is to pass a string of postcard-perfect villages, built on lakeshores and riverbeds, with little discernible industry or source of income. An estimated four people per square mile live in the valley; some work in logging, others in tourism, but many of the 5,600 residents have taken to growing high-grade marijuana. The production of B.C. Bud is now an estimated $7 billion-a-year industry, generating more revenues in the region than mining and oil combined. Every week, 17,000 pounds of marijuana cross into the United States from Canada, in rail cars and aluminum fishing boats, in crop-dusters and helicopters, on foot and in snowmobiles. Local growers – some of whom have been in the business for three generations – sell the weed through independent brokers for gangs, like the Hells Angels or the United Nations. "If it's organized crime, it's not that organized," says Donald Skogstad, a lawyer who has represented growers in the Kootenays for more than 20 years. "Everybody operates as freelancers. It's far more fractured and disjointed than you think."

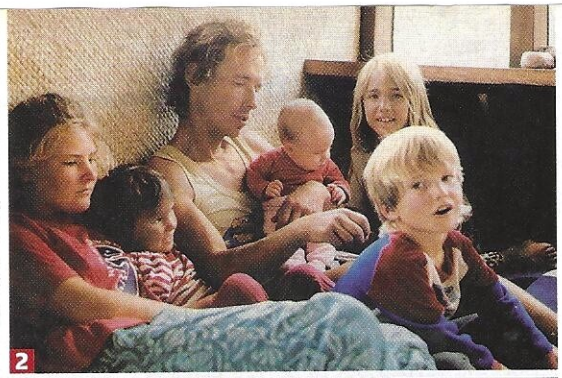
Brown did not come from a family of growers or smugglers. His grandfather was born in British Columbia, where he worked as a tree faller until a timber accident took his life when Sam's father, Lou,

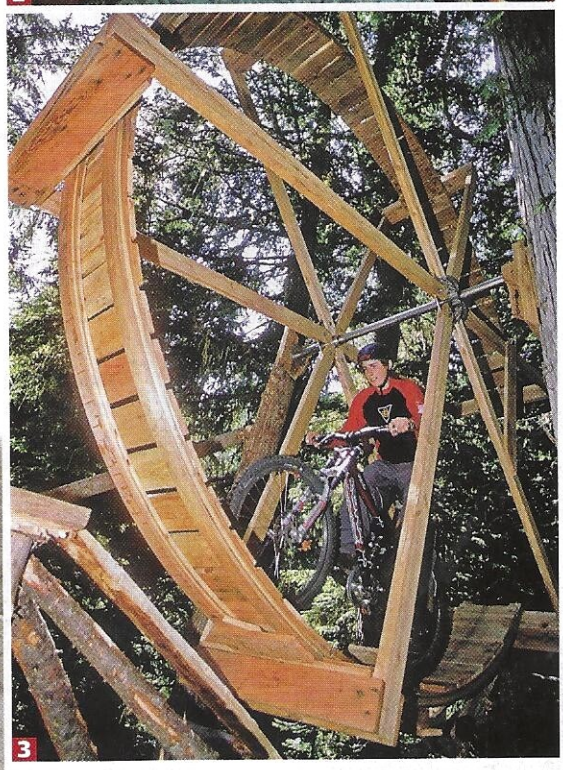
"Sam had the potential to be one of the best

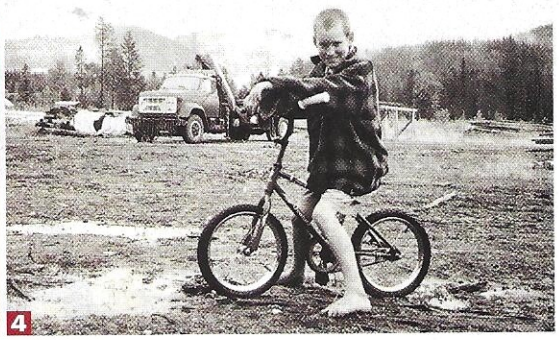
This is writer JESSE HYDE*'s first story for RS. He lives in Salt Lake City.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: COURTESY OF THE BROWN FAMILY









The Wild Child

Sam Brown became a mythic figure in his hometown of Nelson, British Columbia – famous for his mountain-biking skills and his unusual upbringing. **(1)** Brown in March 2008. **(2)** The Brown family in New Zealand in 1991, when they lived off-grid, 50 miles from the nearest town. **(3)** The Disconstructed Wheel that Brown built cemented his status among freeriders. **(4)** As a boy, Sam had to fend for himself in B.C.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: KERTIS BROZA; COURTESY OF THE BROWN FAMILY; DOUG LEPAGE; COURTESY OF THE BROWN FAMILY

mountain bikers in the world," says one pro.

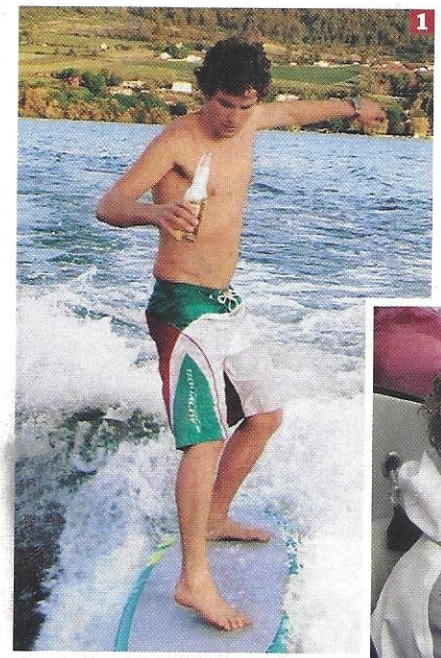
was two. In 1967, at the age of 18, Lou hopped on a plane to Europe, let his hair grow long and eventually ended up in New Zealand, where he became a commercial fisherman. A decade later he married Elizabeth Lindsay, a brown-haired, strikingly beautiful local who shared his hippie sensibilities, which included a preference for organically grown produce, a love of Bob Dylan and a belief that television would, in Lou's words, "rot your fucking brain." They made their home in a place called Barn Bay, a secluded corner of New Zealand sandwiched between forest and ocean, where they raised Sam and his four sisters in total isolation. Their nearest neighbors were 50 miles away. They had to generate their own electricity using windmills, grow their own vegetables and backpack in everything else they needed. "We decided to pull away from society and do it on our own," Lou recalls.

Sam and his sisters took correspondence courses and wore clothing their mother spun out of wool. They gathered firewood, learned how to make peanut butter and took day-and-a-half trips into town. Elizabeth taught the children how to recognize edible berries and plants. Left to their own devices, they became a wild tribe in search of adventure. Jennifer, a year older than Sam, taught her siblings how to climb up into the dense jungle canopy 60 feet overhead, where they could swing from tree to tree on vines and clamber about like monkeys.

Sam had the exotic looks of his mother and the mathematical brain of his father. He loved trucks and motorcycles and the helicopters that often landed on a nearby airstrip, bringing hunters who came to the bush to shoot deer. Whenever Sam got the chance, he'd tag along with his father, sometimes sitting in his lap on helicopter rides. "He would go with me wherev-

er," Lou recalls. "He'd sleep with me under bridges and in the rain and never complain. He'd wake up smiling."

In 1994, when Sam was nine, a severe recession had crippled New Zealand's fishing industry. The family sold their land in Barn Bay and bought a farm in the interior that turned out to be 426 acres of desert wasteland. Neither Lou nor Elizabeth were farmers, and nothing they did worked: The corn Lou planted died, the walnut trees Elizabeth tended bore few nuts. When Elizabeth joined a New Age religion that Lou considered a cult, the couple split up. Lou took Sam and his sister Jennifer to British Columbia, where they settled in the town of Blue River and lived out of a tepee that Lou built.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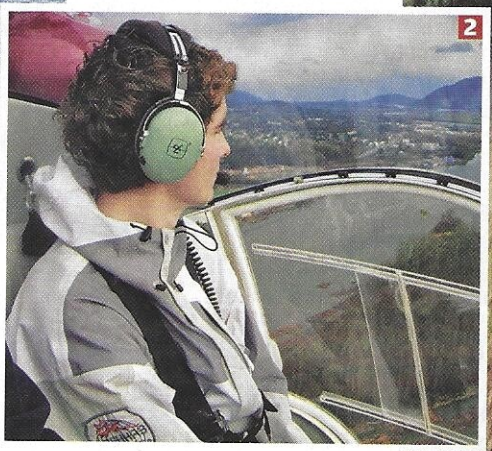
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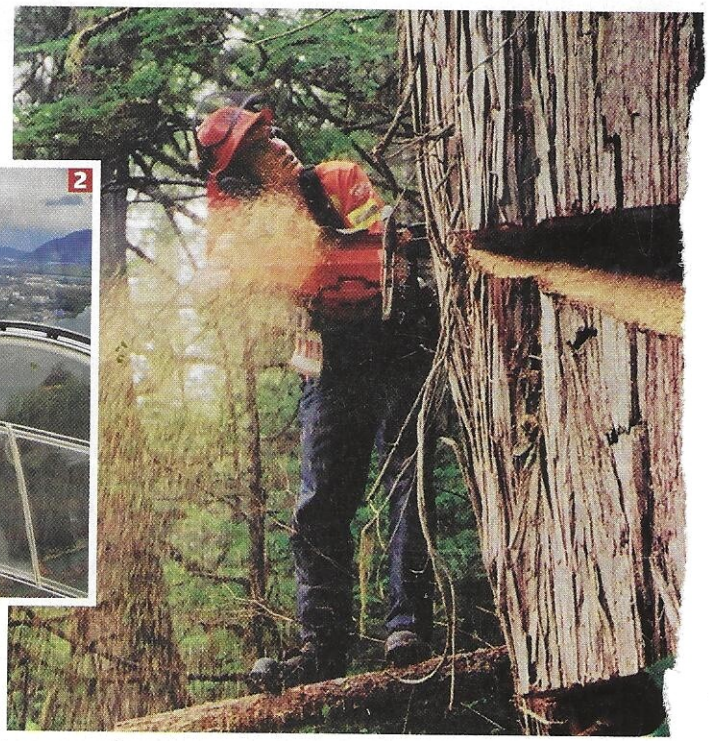
To Sam and his sister, Blue River, population 260, might as well have been New York City. "It was like taking kids out of the jungle and into town, like Crocodile Dundee," Lou says. "I remember telling them, 'You can't just piss in the street. You gotta wear shoes.' But they'd hide their shoes before school because they didn't want to wear them."

The split from his mother devastated Sam. And he didn't get to see much of his father, who was working all the time as a logger and a firefighter. "There wasn't really a family thing going on anymore," says Sam's sister Jennifer. "Dad was having a hard time trying to bring us up. We were all kind of rebelling." When Sam turned 13, he convinced his dad to let him move hundreds of miles away to a town called Kaslo and go to school there. Lou found a hostel popular with hikers, asked the owner to look out for the boy and told Sam he would check up on him every couple of months. From then on, Sam was on his own.

For the next several years, Sam was always moving from place to place. He camped in the brush; he slept in an old Toyota Land Cruiser he had fixed up; he crashed on the couches of friends. He saw his father every few months and had almost no contact with his mother, other than a phone call now and then. People saw him in the brush, barefoot, or running through the snowy valleys that cut through the Selkirk Mountains. Years later, friends would marvel at his ability to start campfires and catch rabbits with traps fashioned out of bicycle brake lines. He gained a reputation as someone who could get himself out of any jam. But beneath his knowing smile and his soft voice, friends say, Sam felt abandoned and alone.

"In New Zealand, all we had were each other – there were no outsiders," recalls Jennifer. "We were each other's friends and each other's family. So when we broke up, we all went a little haywire."



After Sam entered high school, he moved in with a friend in Nelson, an artsy hamlet built on a hillside on the shores of Kootenay Lake. In winter, the town looks like something out of a storybook, with its steep roads, glowing streetlamps and castlelike art museum restored to the glory of the 1880s silver-rush days, all dusted with snow. A magnet for granola and counterculture types ever since U.S. draft dodgers discovered it during the Vietnam War, Nelson is a laid-back place that has become a center of the booming pot culture in British Columbia, a sort of marijuana Shangri-La. While Sam lived there, the growers congregated at the recently shuttered Holy Smoke Culture Shop, a white clapboard head shop just off the main drag that served as a gathering place for potheads who flocked to Nelson from around the world to buy North America's most potent weed. The town had also become a hub for freeriders, an outlaw group of extreme mountain bikers, and the two cultures often intersected. As a teenager, Sam tried growing a bit of weed, but he got thrown out by a family friend and decided to give it up. From then on, mountain biking became his primary focus.

He discovered the sport in the late 1990s, just as it was undergoing a dramatic change. In the same way that skateboarders a generation before had figured out a way to turn the concrete jungle of urban America into a personal playground, a new breed of mountain bikers were doing the same in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Using chain saws, shovels and sledgehammers, they built intricate, roller-coaster-like trails out of scrap lumber and logs. The trails included ladder bridges that soared 12 feet off the ground, wooden ramps that launched riders over riverbeds, and deep bowls dug out of the forest floor that functioned like half pipes. Park rangers fought back, tearing down trails that were often illegal because they carved destructive grooves into the otherwise pristine forest. As a result, their locations were spread by word of mouth.

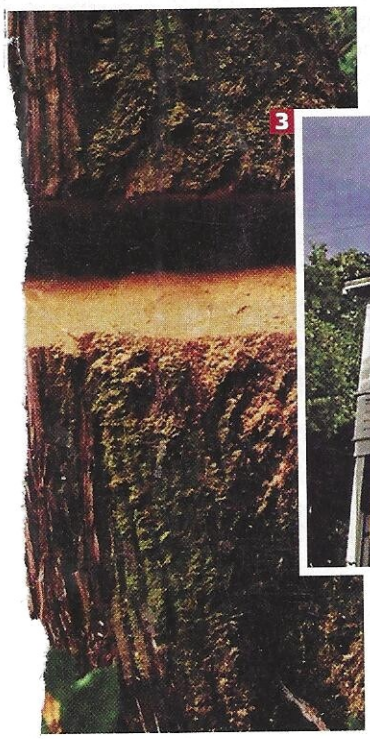
Shortly after Sam started high school, his dad came down to visit him and realized that, instead of going to class, his son had been spending all his time building trails. Sam told his father that he wanted to be like Lou had been as a teenager: a free man, without expectations or responsibilities. Sam agreed to go back to school if his dad wanted him to. But he insisted on finishing the trail, working on it nights and weekends. He had a few new friends, but he was lonely, living away from his family.

COURTESY OF THE BROWN FAMILY. 3

"We were far apart and didn't see each other all the time, but we were still close," Lou recalls. "He said, 'I'll go back to school, Dad.' But he'd be up early, biking and building trails. That's all he wanted to do."

The trail, called Mr. Skinny, was way up in the brush, 10 miles out of town and accessible only by truck on backcountry roads. It included a series of thin rails a dozen feet off the ground that zigzagged between the forest trees. It also featured an element never before seen in extreme mountain biking. It was called the Disconstructed Wheel, and in the freeriding world, it made Sam famous.

Sam built the wheel, which was 16 feet in diameter, over five months in a friend's backyard. When it was finished, he put the pieces in a pickup truck and carted it up to Mr. Skinny, where he hammered it together and attached it, 10 feet off the ground, to a narrow rail. The contraption functioned like a human-size hamster wheel for mountain bikers – the bike's motion set it spinning and propelled it forward. "It was almost impossible to ride," says Bourdon, the pro rider. "When you would ride into the wheel, your forward motion would stop – you would basically be standing still, pedaling. So it's all balance. And then when the wheel stops, your sudden traction grabs and it pulls you out. There were only two guys who could ever ride it, and one of them was Sam."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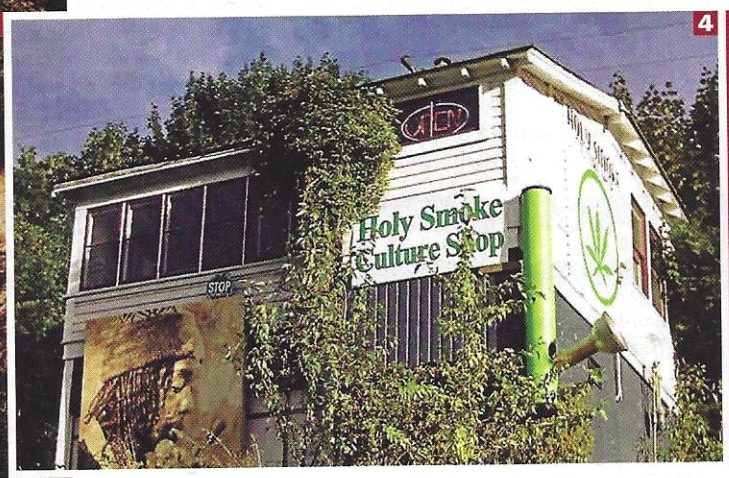

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RAVEN

In 2002, the wheel was featured in a documentary called *New World Disorder 3*, which put extreme mountain biking on the map and made Sam, the youngest rider to appear in the film, a legend within the tightknit community. "He had a small part, but what he was doing was so unique that it stood out," says the film's producer, Derek Westerlund. "Even now, seven years later, people remember it."

Because Sam talked fast and often mumbled, and because his accent was part Kiwi and part Canuck, he was often hard to understand. But he was a natural at freeriding, and completely fearless. At age 16, he showed up at a local mountain-biking event called the Fat Tire Festival, with a skateboarding helmet and no pads, and beat all the pros. Another time he convinced a hang-gliding instructor to let him fly solo, even though he had never been hang-gliding in his life. Sam took off without a hitch and nailed the landing perfectly, as if he'd been doing it for years.

After *New World Disorder 3* came out, Sam started spending time at Westerlund's production office in downtown Nelson, a popular hangout for mountain bikers. Some of them, he soon learned, had found another form of adventure on the side. "Downhill skiers, snowboarders, mountain bikers – these are the guys who get off on the rush of running weed across the border on a snowmobile or on foot," says Skogstad, the Nelson lawyer who represents pot growers. "It's not some guy who sits around watching TV."

Sam enjoyed the wild tales the smugglers told about their crazy runs and narrow escapes, but he wasn't tempted to join them. He loved mountain biking and felt at home among his fellow freeriders. Then one day, when he was up in the mountains preparing to perform another stunt for a movie, Sam watched as a friend sustained a serious leg injury coming off a jump. The film crew had no first-aid experience, and Sam's friend lay in agony for more than an hour before he was carried off the slope.

"He realized that the filmmakers had no idea what to do," says Sam's sister Elinor. "They didn't really care about the riders. They were always pushing people to go bigger – whatever it took to get that shot – just using them. Sam figured, 'If I'm going to risk my life doing something, there are other things I can do that pay a lot better.'"

Coming of Age in the Land of B.C. Bud

While raising himself in British Columbia, Sam Brown became the ultimate outdoorsman: **(1)** He surfed on Kalamalka Lake, **(2)** learned to fly a helicopter and **(3)** earned a living as a logger felling 250-foot trees. **(4)** In the town of Nelson, he discovered a way to combine his skills and moved on to B.C.'s $7 billion-a-year industry: smuggling weed.

After high school, Brown kicked around Nelson, working as a logger and picking up odd jobs around town during the spring thawing season. Then, in September 2005, a woman 12 years his senior hired him to fix her basement. Her name was Julie, and she was a dark-haired, willowy beauty whom he affectionately referred to as Downtown Julie Brown. She had two boys and was everything Sam wasn't: urbane, political, sophisticated. Sam made an immediate impression on her. "He had this purity, this innocence about him," she recalls. "And he seemed really mature for his age."

Brown refinished Julie's basement, and six months later he returned and told her that he wanted to move in. There was nothing inappropriate about his request – he wanted to buy the house across the street, he explained, and it would be easier to fix it up if he could live in her basement, paying rent. Five months later, they were a couple.

For Brown, who had just turned 20, the next year and a half were the most grounded he would ever be. He took to Julie's children as if they were his own, bringing the youngest with him wherever he went, sometimes carrying him in a bucket around the house. "If we ever have kids," he would tell Julie, "I will never let them out of my sight." Julie was uncomfortable with their age difference and the looks she got in town, but whenever she complained Sam would grin and tell her, "Don't worry about it – we're made for each other."

He left for weeks at a time to remote logging camps on the coast of B.C. The money was good – as much as $1,000 a day – but the living was hard. Brown slept in crammed trailers with men 20 years his senior, eating boiled vegetables and mashed potatoes. They worked through rain, snow and freezing temperatures. The job, which requires loggers to wield four-foot-long chain saws to fell 250-foot trees, is also extremely dangerous: It has a

higher fatality rate than any other job performed on land.

"He was one of the youngest guys there, and he couldn't believe how rough it was," Julie recalls. "It was 'fuck this' and 'fuck that.' He would come home and say to me, 'I can't believe how many times these guys can use the word "fuck" in one sentence.'"

When he got home, though, he made up for lost time. He chopped down a tree in Julie's backyard and built her a deck. He played mock drinking games with her children, taking shots of vinegar until they were all laughing so hard nobody could keep anything down. "He told me he had just the right amount of roar and meow for me, and he was right," Julie says. "He was so strong, he could chop down a tree and tell me exactly where it was going to land, but he also had this soft, gentle side. I mean, he'd carry me into our bedroom. What man does that?"

In early 2006, Julie began putting her savings into a clothing store in downtown Nelson. Brown wanted something different, something like what he had left behind in New Zealand: to have kids of his own, to buy some property on the lake and work the land. Brown had no interest in what he called Julie's "fucking fashion bullshit," and the two started to grow apart. When they finally split up that summer, Brown was devastated. "Every woman in my life has let me down," he later told a friend.

That summer, Brown started to hang out with a different crowd in Nelson. "You can't walk down the street here without running into somebody in the business," says Westerlund. "This town is built on weed." Brown's introduction to the business was slow and gradual: At first he grew some pot, then he ran it across the border, both on foot and on snowmobile. It was easy work. He picked up the product two miles from the border, and by the time he was back, falling snow had already covered his tracks.

Then, in 2007, Brown took a course to become certified as a heli-logger, plucking trees off slopes too steep for trucks and other heavy machinery to reach. It was during this time, his friends say, that he met a man named Colin Martin. Thirteen years older than Brown, Martin had a sturdy build, a quick smile and a love for adventure. Martin knew Brown from around town and often had him over at his house, where Brown built mountain-bike trails. Brown would take his bike up a ladder, ride down the roof of an outbuilding, pick up speed as he crossed Martin's yard and launch off a giant dirt jump he had created, clearing a bulldozer parked in the middle of the yard. Martin's kids loved it and often teased their father because he wouldn't try it.

While Martin presented himself as a legitimate businessman, it was widely known that he had been a drug smuggler. He had first come to the attention of the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1998, when a teenager carrying a hockey bag stuffed with marijuana was nabbed at the border and identified Martin, then 28, as his supplier. The DEA helped Canadian Mounties install a tracking device in a Martin family truck and tapped his phone. They watched as Martin and his crew loaded airplanes and helicopters with marijuana and followed his couriers as they traveled to landing sites on the U.S. side of the border. In two years, the DEA had enough evidence to identify Martin as the leader of a smuggling ring that was moving millions of dollars of weed. Martin was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

Shortly after Brown met Martin, he began flying loads of pot across the border, making as much as $40,000 a run. "We all knew about it," says one of his friends. "We just didn't ask much because we didn't want to know, and Sam pretty much kept it to himself."

Brown wasn't usually the type to flash around the money he made – Julie says he owned only one pair of pants. But once he started smuggling drugs, the boy who grew up in the jungle suddenly discovered how to have a good time. He bought snowmobiles and snowboards, and took his mountain-biking buddies to places like Mexico and Fiji to surf. He splurged on expensive tequila and picked up $1,500 tabs at sushi restaurants. In the summer, he spent much of his time wake-boarding on Kootenay Lake. During a competition in Kelowna, the boat was filled with half-naked girls, nothing but tape covering their nipples. Brown started partying late into the night in bars around Nelson. He'd call friends at 3 a.m. to sled near Trout Lake or hit the hot springs near Revelstoke.

"It was weird – he'd show up at these restaurants like he was a big shot, leaving hundred-dollar tips," Julie recalls. "And he started dressing all fancy."

Those who had known him for years were worried. In high school, Brown had been a health freak, snacking on dried kale and raw carrots during his long trips up to his dad's place in Blue River. He didn't mind the occasional can of pilsner or bottle of Corona, but most of his friends had never even seen him smoke weed. But now, girls who looked like strippers were popping up on his Facebook page, and there were rumors he was experimenting with drugs. Once, when one of Julie's sons saw him with his new friends, Brown pretended he didn't see the boy.

"You've changed," Julie told him over the phone. "You're not the same Sam."

His friends didn't know what to make of the new Sam. "No one really understood what the hell was going on," one recalls. "He didn't sleep anymore. It was like he was hopped up on speed, going crazy."

Brown started showing up in the middle of the night at his dad's place with friends Lou had never seen before. "They were into drugs and shit like that," Lou says. "They'd talk tough, and I wasn't sure why he'd taken them on as role models. I made a couple of comments about his changing nature: 'You know, whatever you're doing, just get out of it. You're losing your character. You're not being the Sammy I knew.'"

Asked why he took the last run, Brown smi

IN THE WINTER OF 2007, BROWN and a smuggling partner were flying above the Little Slocan River, an area thick with pot growers, when Brown looked behind them and saw a police helicopter on their tail. They had planned to land in a field near the river, pick up several hundred pounds of marijuana and refuel. But if they landed now, the Mounties would discover a stash house and several million dollars in weed. So they made what could have been a fatal move: They flew directly into the clouds, restricting their visibility to nothing until they had ditched the cops. But the maneuver cost them what little fuel they had left. Terrified, they brought the helicopter down as gently as possible into the brush, where it sustained significant damage to the rotor blades.

Such incidents were starting to get to Brown. Smoking a hookah late at night with his old mountain-biking buddies, he would talk about life as a smuggler, explaining how complex it was to fly a helicopter through bad weather – calculating the crosswinds, charting the peaks and valleys, evading the police Black Hawks that patrolled the border. What started out as an adventure had become a business, and it was taking its toll. He longed for the simpler days, when he and his friends took their mountain bikes to the top of the local ski run during the summer and went charging down the black-diamond trails.

By then, however, Brown had already popped up on the DEA's radar. In March 2008, according to a federal indictment released earlier this year, Brown helped load a helicopter with 200,000 Ecstasy pills, which were then delivered to Tukwila, Washington – part of a smuggling ring that was running as much as 300 kilos of cocaine into Canada every week.

Brown in 2003 riding one of the trails he built, which helped put extreme mountain biking on the map

MATTHEW SCHOLL

led. "It's all about the adventure," he said.

The woman who picked up those pills was named Lucretia James.

A single mother of two, James stood about five feet six, with long dark hair, puffy lips and moon-shaped eyes. One of the last members of an Indian tribe known as the Sinixt, she loved the outdoors, giving her a natural kinship with Brown. According to a friend who knew them both, Brown appreciated how James didn't mind roughing it, how she loved the same things he did: camping, four-wheeling, snowmobiling, even getting stuck in the snow. "She was down for whatever," the friend says.

But while the two had similar interests, they came from different worlds. James had grown up on the Colville Indian Reservation. She had substance-abuse problems and mental-health issues. Even the drug world they inhabited wasn't the same: In western Canada the pot business is laid-back and seldom violent. Across the border, where James lived, it is heavily influenced by American gangster culture, which James loved. On her Facebook page she listed rap, *The Sopranos* and movies like *Fight Club* as favorites.

James came up to the Kootenays from time to time to visit her mother, an activist with the local tribe, occasionally running the raffle at Thanksgiving powwows. She would also hit the bars with Brown and his friends, sometimes racing their trucks on the way home. Brown often visited her at the reservation after smuggling runs, staying with her for days at a time. He loved her two boys and told his friends that he wanted to do whatever he could to help James raise them and get on her feet.

Brown had no notion that the DEA was closing in on him. "Rules didn't apply," says a friend who helped Brown on smuggling runs and went dancing with him and James. "If the rules happened to catch up, which they didn't, we wouldn't have cared. We had a plan to bust each other out no matter what. We had gone over the plan many times – covered all the bases."

James insists that her dealings with Brown were strictly business. "Lucretia says Sam never gave her any money outside of a business transaction," says her attorney, Jon Zulauf. "She denies they ever had a relationship." But Brown's friends say differently. "He was in love with her," insists one. "They did runs together. Can you imagine the level of intimacy that builds up with something like that? You're putting your life in that person's hands."

On March 10th, 2008, James was pulled over heading north on a highway near Yolo, California. The arresting officer noticed that she was visibly nervous and hesitated before answering questions. He also noted a strong odor from an air freshener, an open map, two cellphones and a BlackBerry. Searching the SUV, he found a duffel bag behind the front seat and several plastic grocery sacks in the cargo hatch, each stuffed with packages of cocaine – some bearing the insignia of a major drug cartel. In all, authorities say, James was transporting 74 kilos, with an estimated street value of $5.6 million. She pleaded guilty to possessing and intending to deliver the drugs and received a sentence of 18 months.

Brown told his friends that he would do whatever he could to help James. He bought an expensive bottle of tequila and carried it with him in his truck. When she got out, he planned to celebrate with her.

A few weeks before Brown made his final smuggling run, he visited an old friend. It had been years since he'd been featured in a mountain-biking film or entered a competition, but he stopped by Derek Westerlund's film-production shop in Nelson and talked about plans he had for a new trail. It would include self-propelled elevators, like something out of Donkey Kong. Westerlund thought the idea was brilliant – there was no trail builder out there with Brown's creativity. Whenever Brown wanted back in, Westerlund told him, there was a place for him in the freeriding community.

"You could feel him reaching back, trying to return to where he [*Cont. on 96*]

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SPORTS ON THE EDGE09

The world's most fearless athletes – you can question their sanity but never their guts By Josh Dean

BOB BURNQUIST

The Man Who Hates Gravity

THOUGH IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO QUANTIFY WHICH ATHLETE HAS the biggest balls, you can make a good case for Bob Burnquist. When ordinary skate ramps got boring, Burnquist moved on to the Mega Ramp, and now he owns the world's only private version – a 300-foot-long, 80-foot-high replica of the X Games' ramp with a 70-foot gap that is best known for nearly killing the skater Jake Brown. The ramp lives in Burnquist's backyard in Vista, California, and he rides it almost every day. The 32-year-old Brazilian-American may not fit the profile of a fearless action-sports nut – he is a soft-spoken hippie who preaches a sustainable lifestyle – but he has won the past two X Games gold medals in Big Air, and he remains the world's only skate-BASE jumper: In 2006, he launched from a giant ramp alongside the Grand Canyon, flew onto a rail, slid to the edge of the canyon and parachuted to the floor below. "People think I'm just crazy without skill," he says. "But I only do something crazy when I know I have enough skill to do it. I just want to live my life a certain way."

BACKYARD FUN Burnquist at home in Vista, California

JAMIE MOSBERG

INCOMING Pastrana back-flipping in Panama

'NITRO CIRCUS'

'Jackass' for Jocks

IT'S HARD TO WATCH "NITRO CIRCUS" and not wonder, "How are these people not dead?" MTV's athletes-gone-wild reality show (which returns August 27th) features that much derring-do and is the brainchild of Travis Pastrana, which shouldn't really surprise anyone. Pastrana is an X Games Renaissance man who spends much of his free time pursuing ludicrous feats – for instance, back-flipping a Big Wheel over the 70-foot gap on Bob Burnquist's Mega Ramp.

Nitro Circus is produced by the *Jackass* guys (surprise!) and follows Pastrana and a handful of friends (most of them action-sports stars like motocross racer Jolene Van Vugt and mountain biker Jim DeChamp) around the world as they attempt things never tried before, including, in one episode, breaking the record for breaking the most *Guinness* world records in one day. They set 42 – some of them just plain stupid (longest distance-jumping on a lawn mower?). Pastrana promises bigger and better things in Season Two. "Take last year and multiply it by 10," says Pastrana, who had just come home from wing-walking on a biplane wearing only his shoes and underwear.

Kings of Pain A season of scar tissue for *Nitro*'s stars

Travis Pastrana

- Torn MCL and meniscus in right knee; two knee surgeries
- Hip surgery
- Cracked vertebrae
- KO'd on Big Wheel
- Two bruised nuts

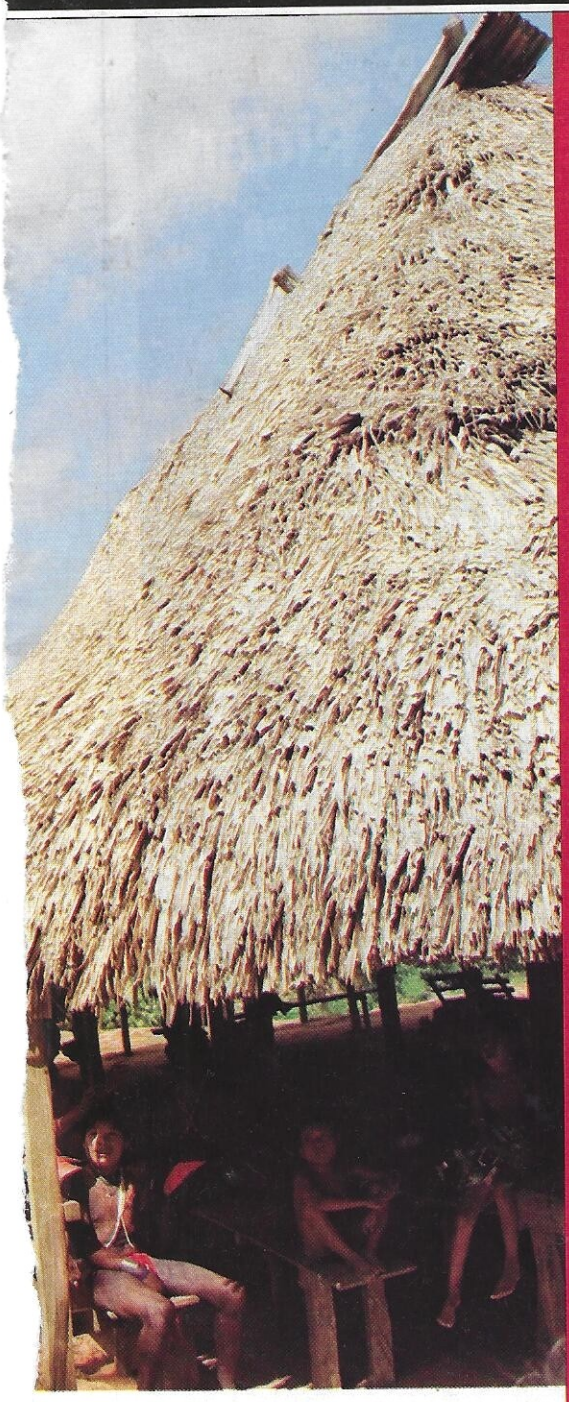
Jolene Van Vugt

- Two concussions
- Fractured tailbone
- Broken right ankle
- Compressed lower back
- Severe whiplash
- Bruised sternum with torn cartilage

Jim DeChamp

- Broken back and cracked T12 vertebrae
- Broken right ring finger
- Sprained ankle
- Two concussions
- Sprained liver

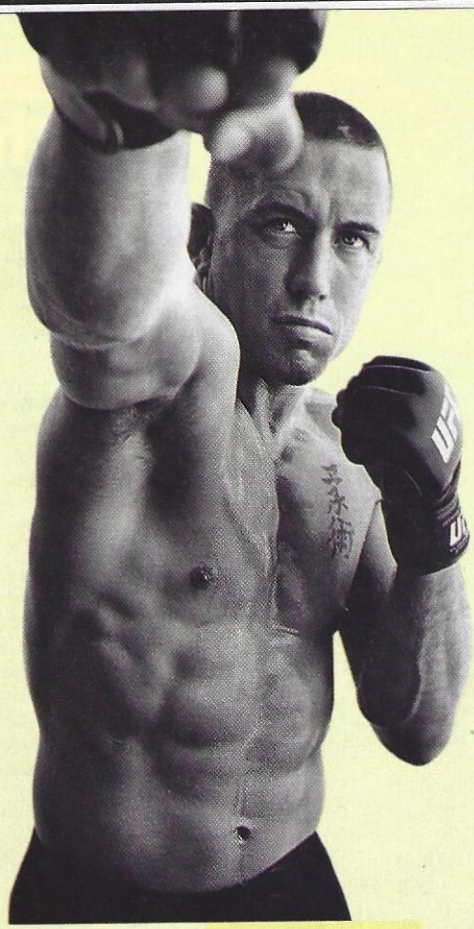
NATE CHRISTENSON



"Yesterday one guy did a back flip on a rocket-powered Big Wheel. Big Wheeling has gone way too far." Next up for the *Nitro* gang is a tour that Pastrana describes as "Cirque du Soleil for action sports on steroids."

There is no collection of humans on TV so willing to leave common sense behind, and the fact that they're also pro athletes just intensifies the stunts' ridiculousness. "It's about competition," Pastrana says. A surefire motivator when a teammate is wary of a trick, he adds, is to say, "If you're scared, you don't have to do it." The resulting circus, he says, is "totally underprepared and overenthusiastic. You'd be amazed how much you can do just yelling, 'Uh-oh!'"

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RICHARD PHIBBS/CORBIS OUTLINE; PAUL THOMAS/AP IMAGES; HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES; TONY FIRRIOLO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; ICON SMI/CORBIS



The Fearless Five

The baddest men in their respective businesses never back down

Georges "Rush" St-Pierre

This former Montreal club bouncer isn't huge – he's 5-10, 170 pounds – but it hardly matters. Check any Mixed Martial Arts ranking for his class and you'll find GSP near the top. Marketers envision him as the sport's big breakout star – he's the first MMA guy to pimp Gatorade, for one thing – and his win over Thiago Alves at UFC 100 could well be the fight that does it. "He is a new breed of mixed martial artist," says UFC honcho Dana White. "He is good at everything and is getting more confident. He has absolutely no fear of any opponent. Anybody that the public or UFC sees as a challenge to him, he wants to fight – anyone."

Larry Fitzgerald

At a position defined by divas, he is a rarity – willing to catch any ball even if he knows he's going to get hit. In 2008, he had the most postseason receiving yards in history and led the Arizona Cardinals to the Super Bowl. "Wide receivers are usually soft," says NFL great Tony Siragusa. "Larry is a defensive player at wide receiver."

Chase Utley

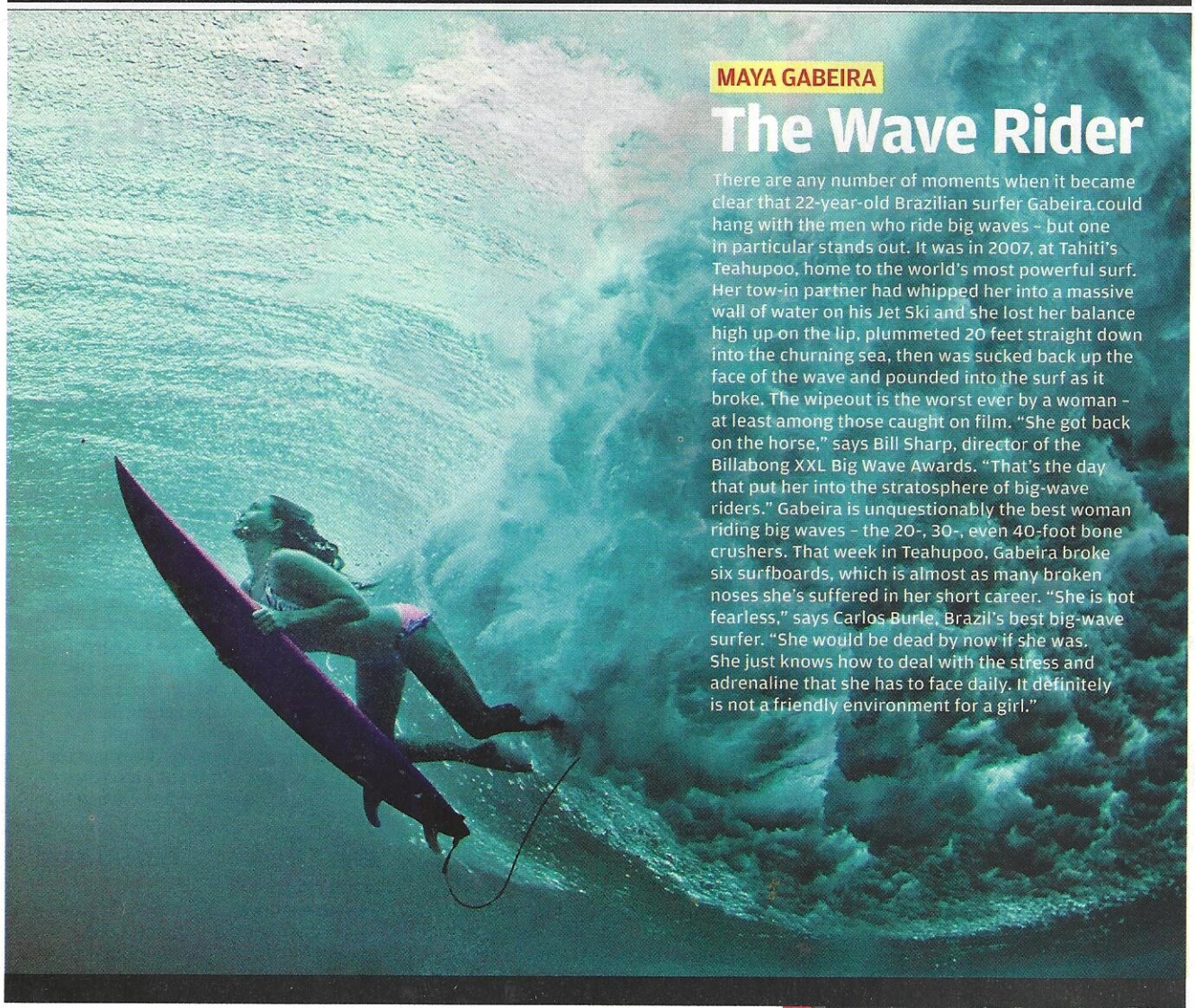
The Philadelphia Phillies second baseman is the prototypical "throwback player," the guy who works hard, never complains, always has his teammates' backs. "Utley is a cold killer," says ESPN analyst Chris Singleton. "His eyes never change, whether he's doing great or so-so. Throw a 1930s uniform on the guy and he'd belong."

Ron Artest

The newest L.A. Laker recently told a story of a pickup game from his childhood in which a guy was stabbed to death with a table leg. "So I'm accustomed to playing basketball really rough," he said. Says TNT's NBA analyst Kenny Smith, "There are certain guys on a team who can raise the intensity of other players. That's Ron Artest."

Tim Howard

The goalkeeper for the U.S. National Team just shut out Spain at the FIFA Confederations Cup, the greatest win in U.S. soccer history. "He's a real big body," says Alexi Lalas, former star for the U.S. team. "If you're going to challenge him, more often than not you're going to get knocked right on your ass."



MAYA GABEIRA

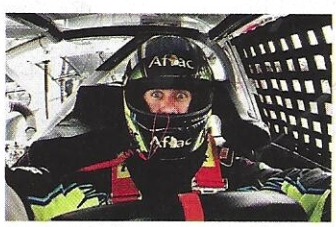
The Wave Rider

There are any number of moments when it became clear that 22-year-old Brazilian surfer Gabeira could hang with the men who ride big waves – but one in particular stands out. It was in 2007, at Tahiti's Teahupoo, home to the world's most powerful surf. Her tow-in partner had whipped her into a massive wall of water on his Jet Ski and she lost her balance high up on the lip, plummeted 20 feet straight down into the churning sea, then was sucked back up the face of the wave and pounded into the surf as it broke. The wipeout is the worst ever by a woman – at least among those caught on film. "She got back on the horse," says Bill Sharp, director of the Billabong XXL Big Wave Awards. "That's the day that put her into the stratosphere of big-wave riders." Gabeira is unquestionably the best woman riding big waves – the 20-, 30-, even 40-foot bone crushers. That week in Teahupoo, Gabeira broke six surfboards, which is almost as many broken noses she's suffered in her short career. "She is not fearless," says Carlos Burle, Brazil's best big-wave surfer. "She would be dead by now if she was. She just knows how to deal with the stress and adrenaline that she has to face daily. It definitely is not a friendly environment for a girl."

CARL EDWARDS

NASCAR'S Wild Card

THE 30-YEAR-OLD NASCAR driver of No. 99 Ford is a gosh-darn-it good ol' boy off the track and a fiery and controversial competitor on it. He will do pretty much anything to win races, and then he back-flips off his car in the Victory Lane when it works. ("I feel like half the crowd is like, 'Awesome, he did a back flip,'" Edwards says, "and the other half is like, 'Awesome, he's totally gonna eat it.'") Edwards has tangled with an all-star team of top drivers, nearly coming to blows with teammate Matt Kenseth and spinning out Kyle Busch during the cool-down lap after Busch bumped him just following the finish. He's also won – a lot. "If I were gonna start a race team, of all the drivers racing today, I'd pick Carl," says NASCAR legend Darrell Waltrip. "He's all in, all the time – I've never seen any quit in Carl Edwards." At this year's Talladega race, while leading in the last lap, Edwards attempted to block the second-place car from passing him. That set off a spectacular crash in which Edwards' car flipped over and sailed into the fence along the track, scattering debris (several fans were hurt but not seriously). "I saw pavement out my windshield and thought, 'This is not good,'" Edwards recalls. "And my next thought was, 'I really hope I slide across the finish line.'" He didn't, but when the flaming hunk of metal came to a stop, Edwards climbed out and ran to the finish line, Ricky Bobby style: "I didn't know if it was worth anything, but I thought, 'I got this far, I might as well finish.'"



STEVE FISHER

Madman in the Water

The 33-year-old is the best kayaker in the world. He has run 70-foot waterfalls, been captured by African rebels and lives on an island in Uganda that he bought for $500 and two goats. His next challenge: kayaking the Congo River, which means boating through war zones. "My sponsors are afraid I'm going to get shot," Fisher has said.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BRIAN BIELMANN/RED BULL PHOTOFILES; DESRE PICKERS/RED BULL PHOTOFILES; JASON SMITH/GETTY IMAGES FOR NASCAR

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'ISOLATED'

Surfing a New Reality

A documentary follows extreme surfers to the ends of the world

TRAVIS POTTER WILL GO ANYwhere to find a great wave – preferably one that no one has ever ridden before. Potter, a 29-year-old from Seal Beach, California, is the most famous of the so-called "ferals" – surfers who shun competition and reject the luxurious travel that typifies the pro surfer's life. The ferals seek out waves in remote locales and take only what they can carry on their quest. They sleep on the beach and shit in the woods, eating whatever they find along the way.

This fall, Potter and a small band of fellow ferals can be seen in *Isolated*, a documentary about one of their adventures that almost turned deadly. And production is about to begin on a TV show about the feral ideal that will join *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch* in the burgeoning new genre of macho reality.

"The adventure is finding the wave as much as surfing it," says filmmaker Justin LePera, who after meeting Potter set out to capture the feral quest in its rawest form.

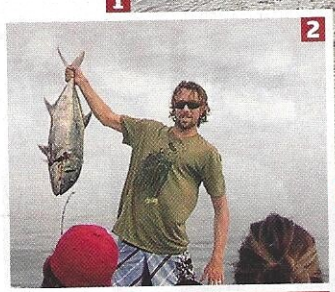
Potter, who speaks Indonesian and who is married to a Javanese woman, selected Papua, a rarely visited section of Indonesia rife with tropical diseases and remote tribes, not to mention a slow-burning civil war, as the perfect destination for the film. He then mounted a search for the ideal surf break using Google Earth, topographical maps, buoy reports and wind forecasts. "I found what looked like a decent setup to surf and thought, 'OK, let's go there,'" Potter says. "So we mapped it out and just tried to get there."

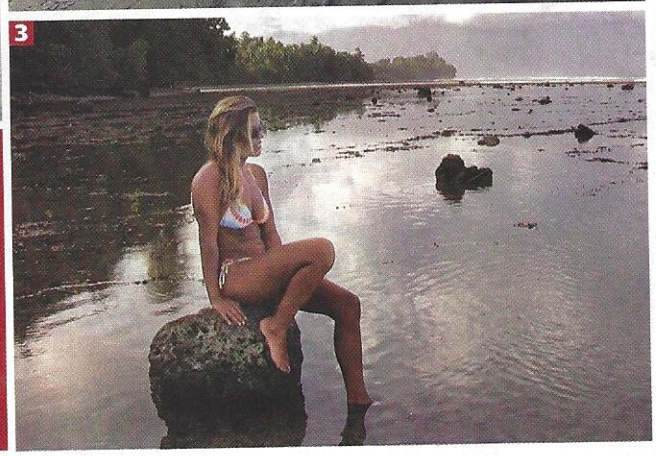
The crew members landed in the city of Jayapura carrying only one large backpack each, their surfboards and film equipment. They were five surfers – Potter; a Salvadoran named Jimmy Rotherham; young Aussies Andrew Mooney and Josh Fuller; a lone woman, pro surfer Jenny Useldinger – and a five-person film crew.

Everyone was responsible for his or her own gear and was given additional tasks: Fuller happens to be a spear fisherman, so he would rustle up dinner in the bush. "It was like *Survivor*," LePera says. "We hired these local fishermen and they just dumped us in the jungle." The crew members were ferried up the coast in wooden dugout canoes and deposited in a friendly village. For a month they traveled this way, covering ground by canoe, taking "jungle dumps" and sleeping on beaches in villages that hadn't seen white faces since World War II. "We had no idea where we were going and where we were staying until we actually got to the places," says Useldinger, who didn't bring a tent and says no one showered. But it was worth the effort. Useldinger, who is one of the only female professional big-wave surfers in the world, says that the break they discovered was "the best surf I've ever seen in my life."

What differentiates *Isolated* from the average surf porn is that it's as much about a foreign culture as it is about waves. The surfers met tribe after tribe who accused the Indonesian government of genocide and claimed to be prepping for an armed revolution. (One village gave the crew a letter of grievances to deliver to the United Nations.) Things got even scarier when Useldinger was stung by a toxic needlefish and she tripped out on poison until the local villagers cured her by taking a white-hot lime that had been roasted in an open flame and placing it into her palm. ("The only time I heard her complain," Potter says. "But that would piss anyone off.") Worst of all, Potter contracted cerebral malaria, an especially lethal variety with a 20 percent mortality rate. He ended up spending six weeks after the trip in a Jakarta hospital.

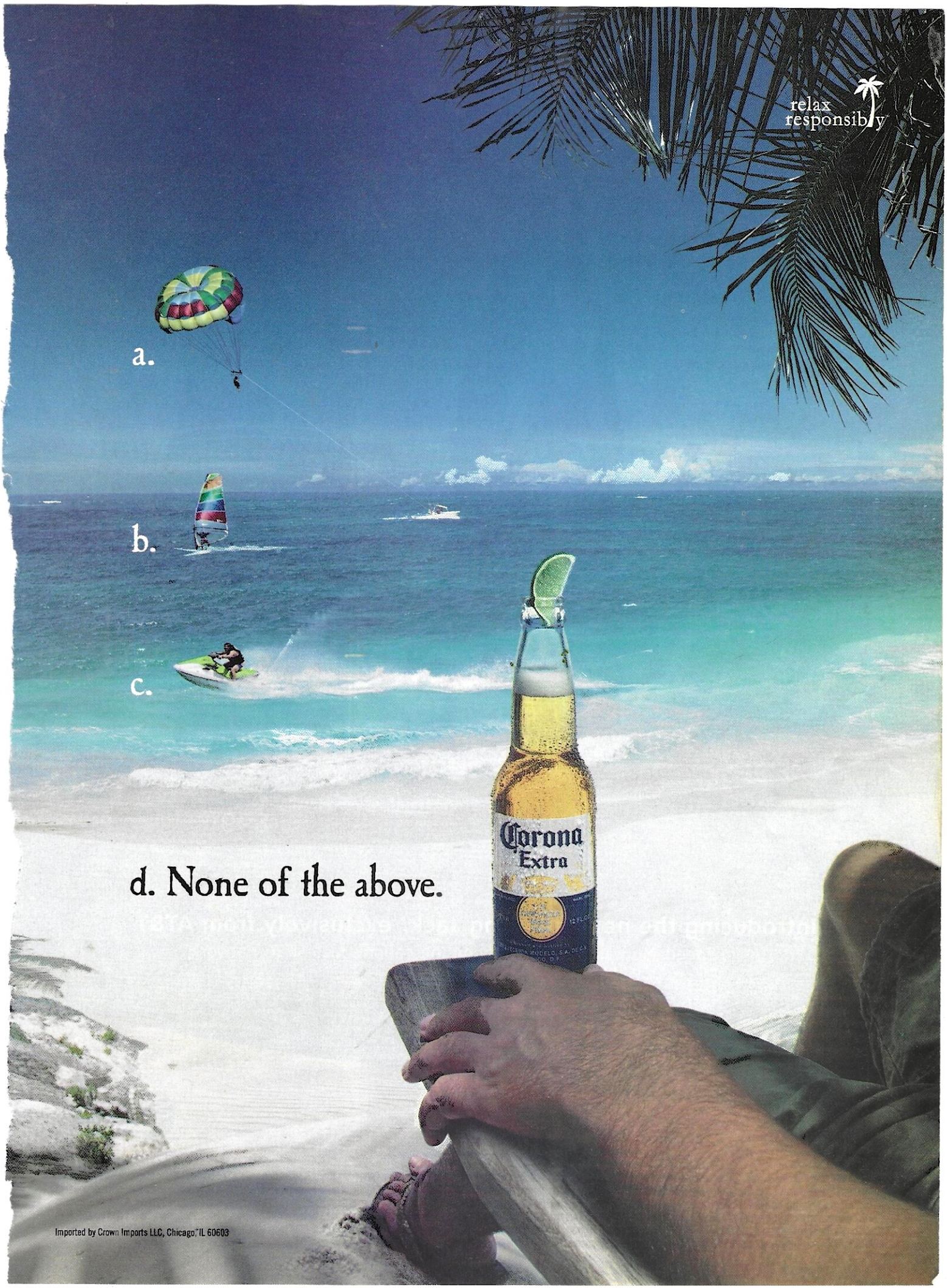
Back in L.A., LePera and producer Geoffrey Clark weren't sure what the film would become. But when actor Ryan Phillippe saw the footage, he immediately signed on to be an executive producer and helped to sell *Isolated*. "As much as I love surfing, it's difficult to get an audience outside the hardcore fanatics," Phillippe says. "But this concept is so fascinating. The biggest draw will be seeing people surfing in a part of the world that's never been surfed before." And Phillippe vows he's coming along on the team's next expedition when the crew returns to Indonesia, no matter how many jungle dumps he has to take. "I'm a lot tougher than I look," he says.





The film *Isolated* follows a group of "ferals" – pro surfers who seek waves in remote locales. **(1)** Andrew Mooney surfing New Guinea; **(2)** Travis Potter catching dinner; **(3)** surfer Jenny Useldinger.

FROM TOP: STU GIBSON; COURTESY OF SOMETHING KREATIVE, 2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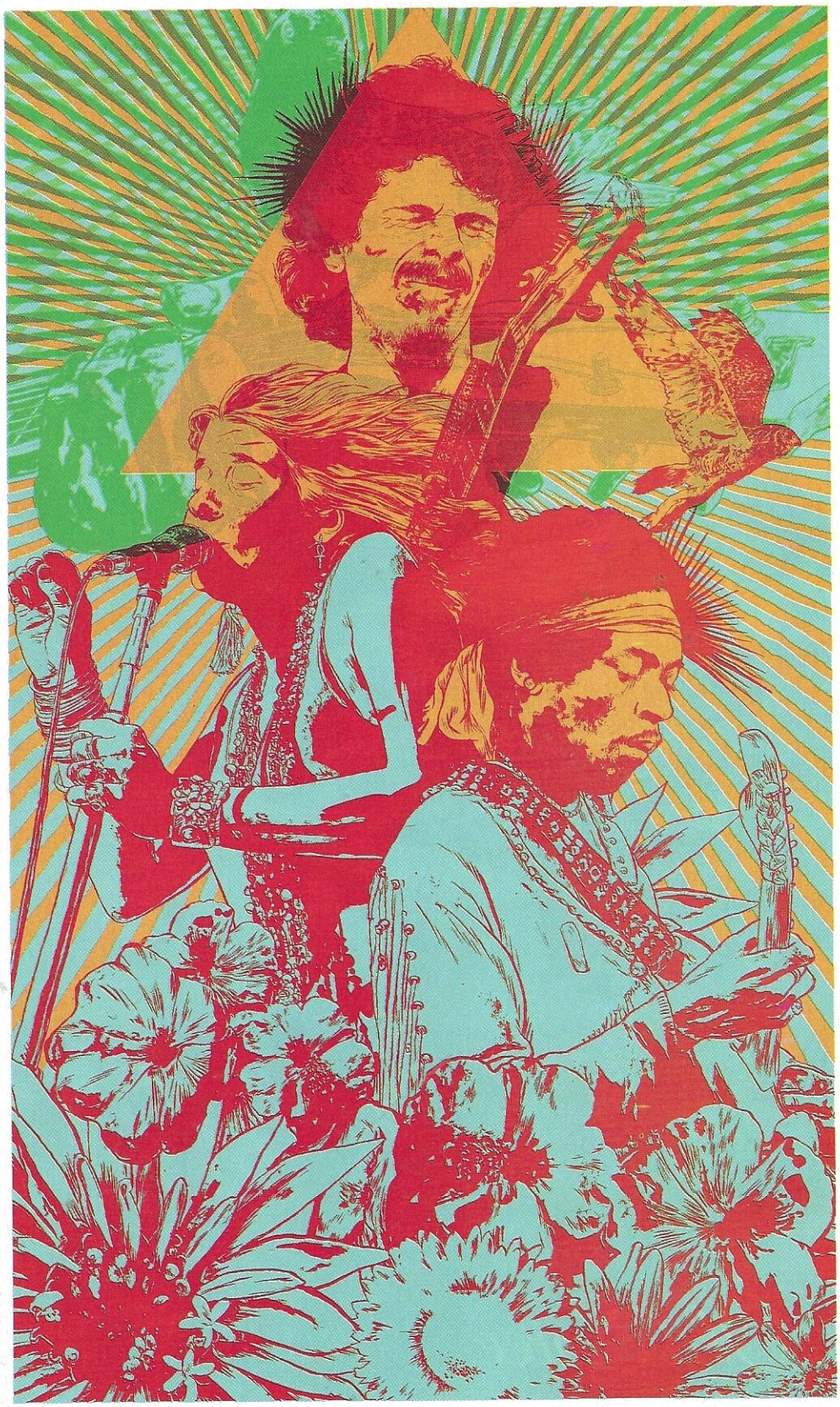

Illustration by Jan Feindt

What did Woodstock really sound like? New sets dig deep

Woodstock – 40 Years On: Back to Yasgur's Farm
Rhino ★★★★½

The Woodstock Experience

Sly and the Family Stone
Epic/Legacy ★★★★

Jefferson Airplane
RCA/Legacy ★★★★

Janis Joplin
Columbia/Legacy ★★★

Johnny Winter
Columbia/Legacy ★★★½

Santana
Columbia/Legacy ★★★★

BY DAVID FRICKE

IF IT HAD ALL BEEN SUNshine and clockwork, with a tidy profit on the morning after, no one would have said another word. Instead, the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, held August 15th to 17th, 1969, near Bethel, New York – a refugee-camp experience officially declared a state disaster area on the second day – became an anniversary industry.

And business is booming. In addition to these six new releases, the 1970 documentary, *Woodstock*, is out as a deluxe DVD set. The 1970 soundtrack and its 1971 sequel, *Woodstock Two*, are back on CD. Then there are the books, replica tchotchkes and commemorative events, mostly drawing on an artfully massaged memory of that weekend's accidental wonder: That amid the frozen traffic, stressed food and medical services, and oceanic mud, "Half a million young people can get together and have three days of fun and music – and have nothing but fun and

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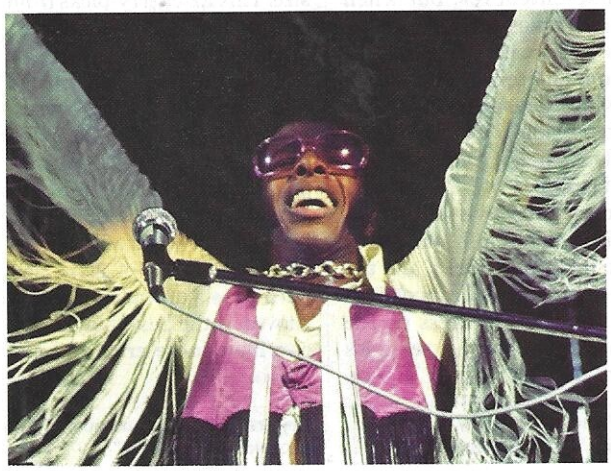
Rolling Stone

music!" as the late Max Yasgur, the farmer who welcomed the horde on his land, said from the stage on Sunday morning.

Yasgur's breakfast speech, edited on the *Woodstock* album, appears in full on *Woodstock – 40 Years On*, a small but telling example of the box's documentary detail and momentum. Its six CDs contain virtually all of *Woodstock* and *Woodstock Two* plus tracks from a 1994 box, then another 38 previously unreleased songs and actualities. All but three of the 32 acts that played are represented (the exceptions, because of licensing issues, include the Band and, strangely, Ten Years After,



PRIME SLY Within a year, Stone would begin his descent.

LEE MARSHALL

who *are* on the 1970 album). Everything is in the order it happened, as it happened. There are bum notes (musicians were high, burnt or both) and bumpy mixes (recording conditions were just shy of wartime). But the result, combined with the full-length performances in the *Woodstock Experience* packages, is the most comprehensive and satisfying account so far of the main reason why Yasgur's acres became an instant city of freaks, including me: the music.

Some of the history gets a valid rewrite. The Grateful Dead's set was a notorious disaster, beset by equipment problems. But the salvaged 19-minute "Dark Star" is good trippin', one of the mostly heavy-rock weekend's few truly psychedelic flings (especially considering the bad acid MC John Morris keeps warning the crowd about). Singer-songwriter Bert Sommer was left out of the movie and the original albums. But the folk-rock strains of "And When It's Over" and Sommer's high, rippling voice suggest a Tim Buckley-in-waiting. (That, sadly, is where he stayed. Sommer died in 1990.) And, honestly, Country Joe McDonald's "F-U-C-K" cheer never felt as mutinous and euphoric on record as it did that Saturday in the open air. The bigger gas is a long excerpt of acid-flecked garage rock from his later appearance with the Fish.

There is a solid shot of Creedence Clearwater Revival's roots-'n'-TNT set and more of the Who's enraged dead-of-night assault, if not enough of either. Pete Townshend's amp-gutting solo in "Amazing Journey" at least partly explains why he didn't hesitate to whack Abbie Hoffman into the pit when the yippie bolted onstage after "Pinball Wizard." (Hoffman: "I think this is a pile of shit while John Sinclair rots in prison!" Townshend: "Fuck off my fucking stage!")

That exchange underscores a dirty, overlooked truth of Woodstock. The biggest massed-youth moment of the decade was also the least political: straight-up capitalism (if you bought a ticket, like I did) and hip escapism. The most direct comment on the real state of the nation – Vietnam, urban riots, civil protest – only came on Monday morning, as most of the mob headed home: Jimi Hendrix's wrenching firefight guitar adaptation of "The Star-Spangled Banner." If it hadn't been in the movie, most of the Woodstock Nation would have missed it altogether.

Hendrix's uneven but epochal finale was finally released in its near-entirety in 1999. Three of the full sets in the Legacy series are even better. (Each volume is a double CD with the act's 1969 studio LP, a drag if you already own the latter.) Sly and the Family Stone were the only deep-R&B act on the bill, and from the shotgun start – a scat-and-gallop "M'Lady" into the smiling swagger of "Sing a Simple Song" – Stone is at the height of his party-politics command. (A year later, he was sinking into drug-and-paranoia twilight.) Jefferson Airplane's Sunday-dawn show is truly "morning maniac music," as singer Grace Slick famously put it: fast and gnarly, spiked with crossed-sword vocals. The convulsive jam out of "Wooden Ships" would have blown minds at any hour.

Key Tracks: Grateful Dead, "Dark Star"; Jefferson Airplane, "Wooden Ships"; Bert Sommer, "Smile"

The Janis Joplin and Johnny Winter shows are, in turn, uneven and near great. She sings with familiar fire but leads her big band with less assurance. He goes overlong on the solos but locks in with his original Texas rhythm section: drummer Uncle John Turner and bassist Tommy Shannon.

But for pure shock, nothing beat Santana's 45 Woodstock minutes. It was one of their first East Coast gigs; the set was their then-unreleased debut LP. And I still clearly remember guitarist Carlos Santana's furious trills cutting the Saturday-afternoon heat over the band's Latin-railroad charge. As far as I'm concerned, for that alone, the rest of the mess was worth it.

Brad Paisley ★★★★

American Saturday Night *Arista Nashville*

Country's 21st-century superstar continues his roll

HAS ANYONE HAD a better decade in Nashville than Brad Paisley? A string of superb albums has established Paisley as the city's most prolific, amiable and funny superstar. His new disc offers a typically appealing mix: prom ballads, gospel-tinged weepers, odes to fatherhood and plentiful yuks. But the heart of it is a double shot of widescreen optimism: the title track's party-hearty celebration of the melting pot, and the arena-rock-flavored "Welcome to the Future," which hails the technological revolution and (without naming him) Barack Obama – who may well be the only American on a bigger roll than Paisley. JODY ROSEN

Key Tracks: "American Saturday Night," "Anything Like Me"

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Wilco

Wilco (The Album) *Nonesuch*

Jeff Tweedy retreats to simplicity – Big Star and country-rock clatter – but can't fully escape the dark clouds of his last few discs. Highlight: the fierce, repeated devotion of "I'll Fight."

YACHT

See Mystery Lights *DFA*

Arty duo Jona Bechtolt and Claire Evans split the difference between Talking Heads and electro pop, and make a breakthrough album of digital ear candy, specifically on the front-porch singalong "Summer Song."

Blur

Midlife: A Beginner's Guide to Blur *Capitol/EMI*

The smartest, funniest Brit-pop band celebrates its reunion shows this summer with a two-disc reminder of why we care.

Jeremih ★★★

Jeremih *Mick Schultz/Def Jam*

Debut from Mr. "Birthday Sex" is no surprise party

EVEN BY THE standards of modern R&B Casanovas – a group not known for beating around the bush – Chicago newcomer Jeremih is a straightforward fella. Metaphor is not his thing: For decades singers have gloried in automotive double-entendres, but when Jeremih brags about his navigation system in "My Ride," he means it literally ("Girls wanna be wifey/'Cause they fell in love with my ride"). There are some lazily formulaic moments here – the chorus of "That Body" rhymes "party" with, uh, "Bacardi." But Jeremih has a way with tunes and hooks, and the love-man game is all about finding new ways to dress up the familiar. It's not just sex – it's "Birthday Sex"! J.R.

Key Tracks: "Birthday Sex," "Imma Star (Everywhere We Are)"

Little Boots ★★★

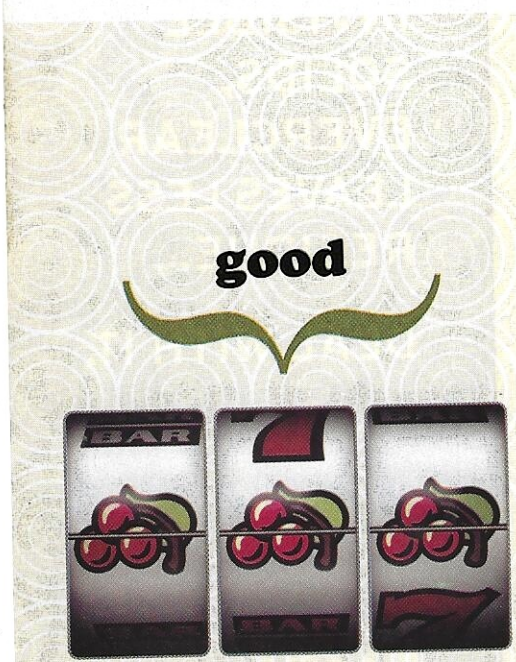
Illuminations *Elektra*

Aspiring Madonna aims to break out of YouTube

SITTING IN HER "bedroom" in short shorts plinking out pop tunes in YouTube videos, Victoria Hesketh has, like Robyn and Lady Gaga, been building a new kind of megastar, at once self-consciously human and dazzlingly supersize. This EP cherry-picks from her hit U.K. LP in an underground-courting package. It includes the sleigh-bell-frosted meta-single "Stuck on Repeat," produced by Hot Chip's Joe Goddard, and "New in Town," a more generic party-on-a-budget jam. Instant Madonna-ness it ain't, but it bodes well that the newest track, "Not Now," cut with mash-up maestros Kid Gloves, is the best. Maybe you can have indie cred and sell it, too. WILL HERMES

Key Tracks: "Stuck on Repeat," "Not Now," "Love Kills"

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor. Ratings are supervised by the editors of ROLLING STONE.



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★★★★ - *Rolling Stone*

Discovery ★★★

LP *XL*

Ra Ra Riot, Vampire Weekend guys do digital-age R&B

LATELY, THE BEST young indie rockers have been showing a voracious appetite for anything but indie rock: soukous, samba, techno, reggae. This one-off by Vampire Weekend's Rostam Batmanglij and Ra Ra Riot's Wes Miles shows two pilgrims on a journey toward Timbaland. These guys build R&B jams with hand claps, 808 whomps and T-Pain-style vocals like hyperactive kids with a Lego set, piling up fragments into tracks that often don't end so much as just stop. True to their indie roots, the party has a sulky undertow. Spooky high point: a cover of the Jackson 5's "I Want You Back" (recorded before MJ's death) that sounds like a sad alien transmission. W.H.

Key Tracks: "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend," "Orange Shirt"

Beastie Boys ★★★★ REISSUE

Ill Communication (Remastered Edition) *Capitol*

Lollapalooza-era Beasties, in all their sprawling coolness

TOPPING THE charts upon its release in 1994, *Ill Communication* found the Beasties out-cooling almost all other alt-rock acts. The New York trio mixed up hooky beat science, hardcore punk and cerebral but brassy rhymes – a sound they had trotted out on 1992's *Check Your Head* but simply did better here. Jazz-funk instrumentals complement party-ready sure shots like "Get It Together" and the indelible rap-rock jam "Sabotage." The bonus disc – 12 tracks of remixes, rarities and live cuts – feels thin, but this remastered version captures every vocodered lyric and shout-out to Buddha (not the drug) in pristine sound. CHRISTIAN HOARD

Key Tracks: "Sabotage," "The Maestro"

Florence and the Machine ★★★½

Lungs *Iamsound*

Red-haired hellion hunts for love and brings an ax

AT POINTS ON her debut album, *Lungs*, Florence Welch suggests she's a wild Englishwoman on par with PJ Harvey: She sets her boyfriend ablaze and cuts out a girl's eye because the bitch won't get her "filthy fingers outta my pie." Welch sets her unique ideas about romance to punk blues, Kate Bush-style mystic art rock and crazy-Celt bombast (where her voice skirts near the Cranberries' Dolores O'Riordan's). The best bits feel like being chased through a moonless night by a sexy moor witch. No wonder the tenderest moment is "My Boy Builds Coffins," where Welch warns, "One of these days he'll make one for you." JON DOLAN

Key Tracks: "Kiss With a Fist," "Dog Days Are Over"

Amazing Baby ★★★

Rewild *Shangri-La*

Brooklyn psych rockers almost live up to buzz

THE NEW HOT-shots of Brooklyn psychedelia are a grimy-looking lot whose lyrics dabble in starving cannibals and weeping whales. On their debut, the quintet spread the arty Cheez Whiz like MGMT and Yeasayer while bringing a stronger Sixties-pop influence, specifically with swirling keyboards with melodies that recall Love and the Dave Clark Five. "Roverfrenz," an airy synth fantasia with Animal Collective-ish percussion, gets by on neato textures instead of sharp tunes. In general, *Rewild* could use a little more of the latter, but who has time for that when you're knee-deep in giant guitars and weird ambient vocalizations? C.H.

Key Tracks: "Bayonets," "Smoke Bros"

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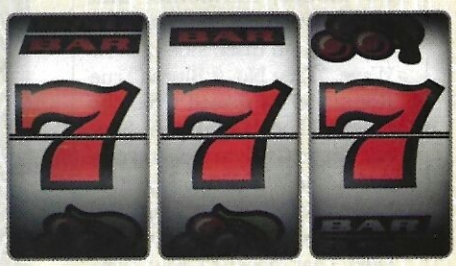


AVAILABLE AT BEST BUY

Amanda Blank ★★★

I Love You *Downtown*

Hip-hop's XXX diva gets down with the boys' club

YOU MAY REmember Amanda Blank from Bangers and Cash's "Loose" video, where she sat on a toilet slinging expletives at naked girls. This Philly rapper's got a mouth your mother could love – if your mom was Lil' Kim. "Tryin'-a get up in my pussy and smash . . . I'm Beyoncé, independent woman, handle that!" she brags on "Let Me Get Some," a booming highlight on her debut. Other tracks run tamer: blank machine-gun one-liners about makeup and true love over New Wave club beats by Diplo and Switch. But on an album where she's surrounded by dudes (including her pal Spank Rock), she makes being ladylike sound hardcore. "I can't be the man you need me to," she admits. Thank God for that. MELISSA MAERZ

Key Tracks: "Let Me Get Some," "Might Like You Better"

Golden Silvers ★★★½

True Romance *XL*

Heartsick soul boys go retro minus a pinch of irony

OFFERING THEIR own spin on the early-Eighties repo job, this London trio forsake guitars, synths and alienation for pianos, harmonies and sticky sweetness, tapping into the soul and disco side of New Wave. "True No. 9 Blues (True Romance)" is peeled from the Clash's "The Magnificent Seven," singer Gwilym Gold's croon on "Please Venus" is a ringer for Elvis Costello circa *Imperial Bedroom*, and "My Love Is a Seed That Doesn't Grow" ventures into weepy-Coldplay territory. And they take their blue-eyed romanticism deadly serious, asking, "Wouldn't it be sweet if you could die from a broken heart?" like genuine kamikazes of love. JON DOLAN

Key Tracks: "Arrows of Eros," "Please Venus"

Daughtry's Lady-Killing Cheese Rock

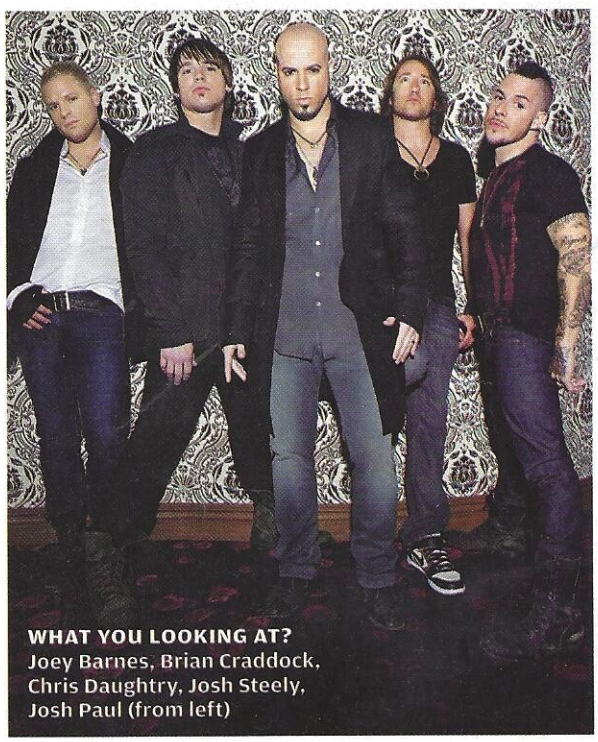
Angry, cocky and corny, the yowler's new disc will shatter ears and melt hearts

Daughtry ★★★ Leave This Town *RCA*

LADIES LOVE CHRIS DAUGHTRY, AND IT'S never been simple for the men in their lives to figure out why. How does Daughtry do it? He doesn't sing pretty, he doesn't write catchy, and you probably look better than this guy when you wake up in the morning, even if you passed out behind Pizza Hut. He always looks incredibly pissed off, as if Vin Diesel just stole his razor. His greatness is the way he embraces the full-on rock cheese that runs in his veins. He has no interest in playing cool; all he cares about is ovary-melting power ballads. Hell, he even calls his band by his surname, a corny trope that rock stars haven't dared since the days of Winger and Montrose.

Key Tracks: "Life After You," "Tennessee Line"

It takes gall to put a song called "No Surprise" on your second disc, but gall is something Daughtry does not lack, and that's what made him one of the only bona fide rock stars to come out of *American Idol*. In *Leave This Town*, he brings in chick-rock titans like Richard Marx and Nickelback's Chad Kroeger, and teams up with Vince Gill for an ace country heart-tugger, "Tennessee Line." But the topper is "Life After You," where he stands by the side of the road, 10 miles out of town, after burning out his engine speeding back to his woman to beg her to take him back. Daughtry is cocky enough to know the ladies love him even more when he makes their boyfriends suffer. ROB SHEFFIELD



WHAT YOU LOOKING AT? Joey Barnes, Brian Craddock, Chris Daughtry, Josh Steely, Josh Paul (from left)

MAX VADUKUL

Various Artists ★★★★ REISSUE

Factory Records: Communications 1978-1992 *Rhino*

From punk to rave via one pioneering U.K. indie label

ONE OF THE world's most influential independent labels, Manchester's Factory Records spent a decade and a half merging experimental rock with electronic club music – a blend that fostered Joy Division's post-punk, New Order's techno rock and the Happy Mondays' mixture of both in their "Madchester" sound. In between hits from those big three groups, Factory issued scores of one-shot singles and albums inspired by the label's studio maverick Martin Hannett or produced by pseudonymous New Order members. This 63-track download version of an import-only box is the best way for Radiohead and LCD Soundsystem fans to sample their favorite bands' roots. BARRY WALTERS

Key Tracks: "Looking From a Hilltop," "Cold As Ice"

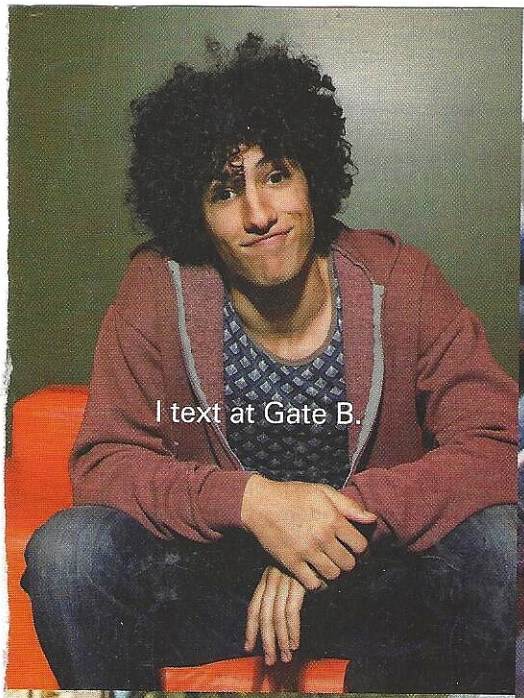
Will Dailey ★★★

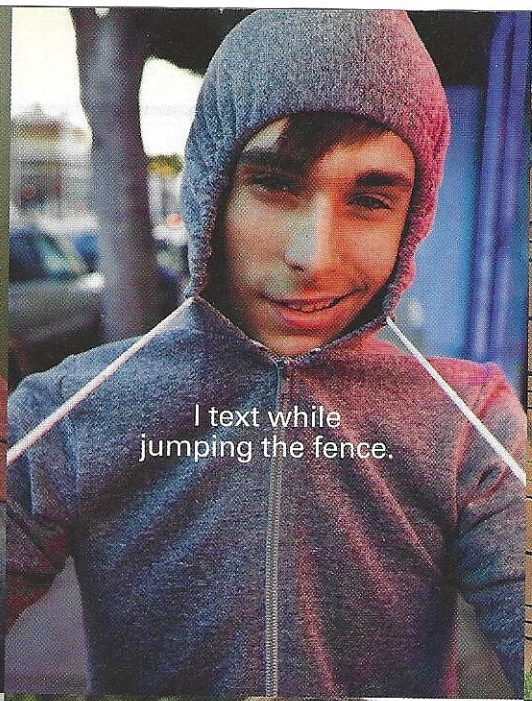
Torrent, Vol. 1 and 2 *CBS*

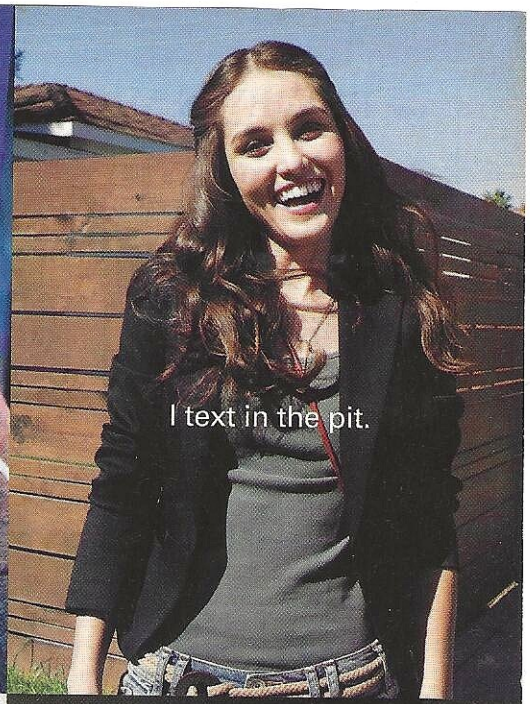
Bright, hummable folk rock from Boston newcomer

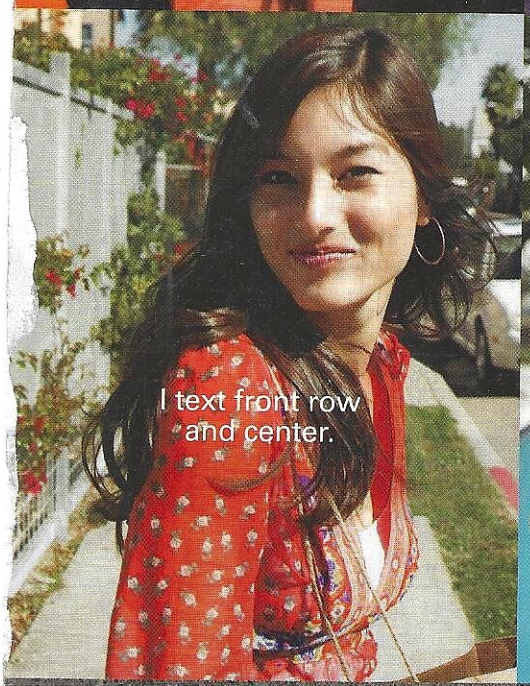
CULLED FROM TWO EPs, the third album from contemplative Bostonian Will Dailey – who has gotten his songs on *CSI: NY* and *Gossip Girl* – keeps things friendly, banking on folk rock that's both hummable and brightly produced (by Dailey and Tom Polce). The harmony-driven, Gram Parsons-esque "Peace of Mind" shows Dailey's gift for pretty, country-ish tunes, but he slides into cheesy Hootie soul on songs like the organ-drenched "Down the Drain" and regularly delivers ponderous aphorisms like "Time won't fix what yesterday starts." We could be hearing more from Dailey – let's hope his next CD has more personality and less gussied-up coffeehouse fare. CHRISTIAN HOARD

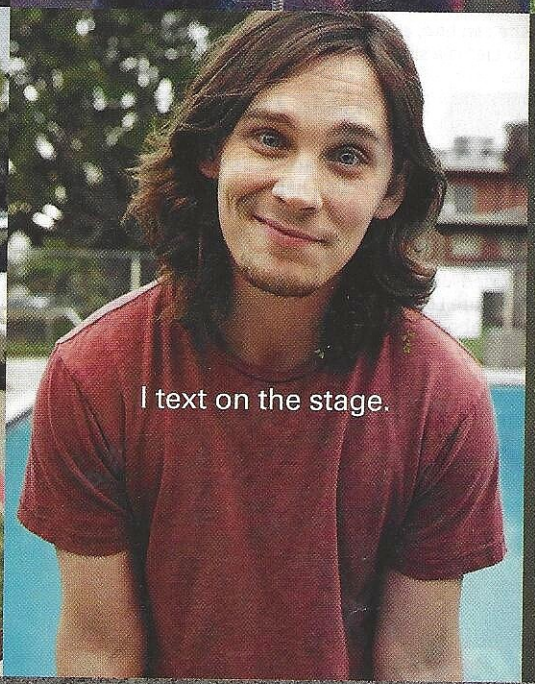
Key Tracks: "Peace of Mind," "Love Is on the Way"

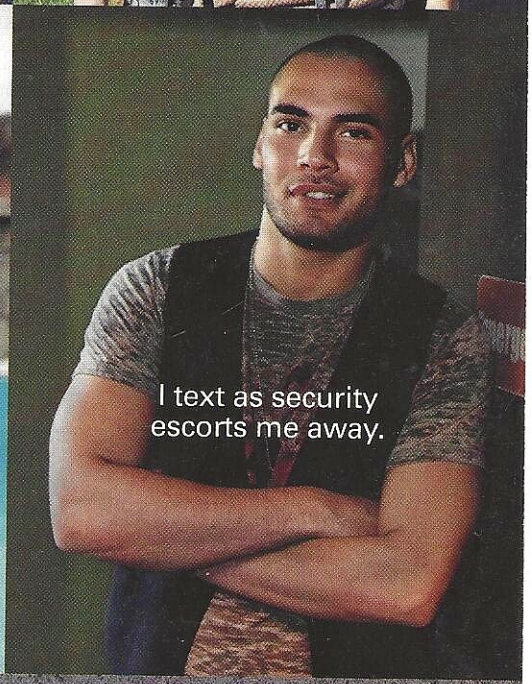


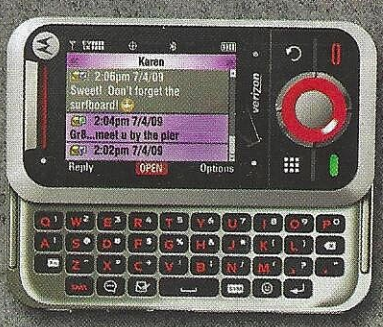












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HELLOMOTO

The Horrors
★★★½

Primary Colours *XL*

Fashionable Brits deliver surprisingly strong goth punk

THE HORRORS' records have been so appallingly wretched up to this point that it would be understandable if you didn't listen to this one. But against all odds, and for no earthly reason at all, these London goth-punk fashion plates suddenly sound as demented and hungry as they look. "Sea Within a Sea" sets the pace with an eight-minute headbang-guitar and organ pulse; it expands into a kaleidoscope of electro patterns as singer Faris Badwan contemplates the void (or maybe that's just his cheekbones). "Scarlet Fields" and "Do You Remember" are ghoulish gems, the sort of sex grooves that inspire you to go jump a skeleton's bones. **ROB SHEFFIELD**

Key Tracks: "Sea Within a Sea," "Do You Remember"

UPDATE: GIRL POP!

Jordin Sparks ★★½

Battlefield *19/Jive*

Something's got this American Idol down on her second album, and it's not the recession. Sparks emotes about bad love amid beats that mix snazzy electro with stadium-rock bigness. She also comes off like a scrubbed-up deep feeler who doesn't distinguish herself, delivering pat lines like "When you fall the hardest, you find out how strong you are" and falling flat on "S.O.S. (Let the Music Play)," a piece of bland disco that wishes it were "Just Dance." **CHRISTIAN HOARD**

Demi Lovato ★★★

Here We Go Again *Hollywood*

Lovato is a 16-year-old Disney star who digs death metal, a taste that doesn't entirely fit with the Ashlee- and Avril-style tunes on her second album. Lovato has chops and spunk akin to a fellow Texas pop singer, though her voice doesn't churn with Kelly Clarkson's gutsy heart yet. The fiery synth-powered "Got Dynamite" shows she can bite, and the Duffy-like orchestral soul on "Every Time You Lie" is a slick break from her crunchy pop rock. **CARYN GANZ**

Kristinia DeBarge ★★★

Exposed *SodaPop/Island*

On her Babyface-assisted debut, this 19-year-old nearly pulls a hamstring striving for the emotive power of Rihanna or Christina. But she's most fun riding lilting, girly R&B not so different from her dad James' tunes in 1980s group DeBarge. There's childlike confusion on "Cried Me a River," where love is so scary, it's like she's "on E," and "Future Love" is one of the shyest songs about stalking ever. What's that about kids today having no attention spans? **JON DOLAN**

Miike Snow
★★★½

Miike Snow *Downtown*

Swedish pop-production duo jazz up indie-boy ballads

SWEDES: THEY'RE still insane! Enter Christian Karlsson and Pontus Winnberg, better known as Bloodshy and Avant, the Stockholm production duo known for doing tracks with Madonna and Britney Spears, notably on the single-of-the-century contender "Toxic." Here they hook up with indie boy Andrew Wyatt, manhandling his plaintive love ballads until they explode into free-wheeling electro fantasias. "Faker" might be a well-turned pop song on acoustic guitar, but this threesome bring out the unruly emotion in it with synth swirls and junkyard disco breaks. The New Wave yearning of "Plastic Jungle" is something toxic indeed. **R.S.**

Key Tracks: "Faker," "Plastic Jungle"

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TOP SINGLES

R.E.M. ★★★★

Reckoning (Songs From the Olympia)

iTunes

In July 2007, R.E.M. took a break from recording last year's *Accelerate* to play a series of shows at Dublin's Olympia Theatre, reaching back to perform four choice tracks from 1984's *Reckoning*: the chiming "Harborcoat," the love note "Letter Never Sent," the sloppily driving "Second Guessing," and "Pretty Persuasion," where guitarist Peter Buck plucks one of his finest arpeggio riffs. This live EP – pulled from an upcoming two-disc set – is a short, sweet dose of nostalgia. C.G.

Sean Kingston ★★★½

"Fire Burning"

iTunes

The sugar-rushing summer jam that won't stop till you get enough: The cherubic Kingston graduates from the chart-topping malt-shop suicide meditation "Beautiful Girls" to this hyperpowered dancehall-lite confection, courtesy of new-electro superproducer RedOne (see Lady Gaga's stiff-nippled "Poker Face"). You can call 911, but really, it won't help. WILL HERMES

Air ★★★

"Do the Joy"

iTunes

Fuzzed-out guitar, fuzzier synths and studio ace Joey Waronker's measured drums set up an analog anti-anxiety exercise by the French duo that feels uplifting until that robot voice starts going on about sepulchers and extinction. Some people call Air "easy listening," but it makes us uneasy – in the best sense possible. W.H.

Paramore ★★★

"Ignorance"

All major services

On the furious first single from their upcoming LP, the pop punkers mix up their usual sass with hints of the darkness heard on "Decode" (from *Twilight*). Try to deny Hayley Williams when she spits, "Ignorance is your new best friend!" ERICA FUTTERMAN

Spoon ★★★

"Got Nuffin' "

All major services

Britt Daniel gathers piano and guitar into a spiky bouquet, but this tune's intensity comes from his vocals, about a guy who's "got nothin' to lose but darkness and shadows." C.H.

Shwayze ★★★

"Get U Home"

All major services

Lines like "take me in the bathroom . . . make love to me up against a dirty wall" are resistible, but the synth hook – fueled by "cigarettes, coffee and Adderall" – is a different story. NICOLE FREHSÉE

The Very Best feat. Ezra Koenig ★★★★

"Warm Heart of Africa"

myspace.com/theverybest

Vampire Weekend frontman Koenig scrambles falsetto-tipped verses about shell toes, beatboxing and "your favorite ELO" over a break-beat groove as U.K. DJ duo Radioclit sample Sir Victor Uwaifo's late-Sixties Nigerian hit "GuitarBoy," and Malawian singer Esau Mwamwaya chimes in. Somewhere Jeff Lynne is confused but happy. W.H.

Liechtenstein ★★★½

"Roses in the Park"

All major services

This Swedish three-girl band bangs out an effervescent fuzzbox punk sound, combining tough guitars, "sha-la-la" harmonies and mod haircuts; singers Naemi, Renée and Elin ponder teen love without sounding a bit angst-ridden about it. R.S.

J Dilla ★★★

Jay Stay Paid

Nature Sounds

Arty back pages from late hip-hop beatmaker

BEFORE HE died in 2006, James "J Dilla" Yancey built an alternately immediate and arty sound – a mix of busy drumbeats, melodic keyboards and finely chopped samples – that made him Pharrell Williams' favorite beatmaker. This collection of unreleased material is uneven, tossing in undercooked instrumentals alongside tracks with MCs like Black Thought. But cuts such as "On Stilts" ride simple, effective hooks, and Yancey's taste for soundscapes comes out on "I Told Y'All," which splits the difference between DJ Shadow and Detroit techno. C.H.

Key Tracks: "Smoke," "Reality Check"

The Fiery Furnaces ★★★

I'm Going Away

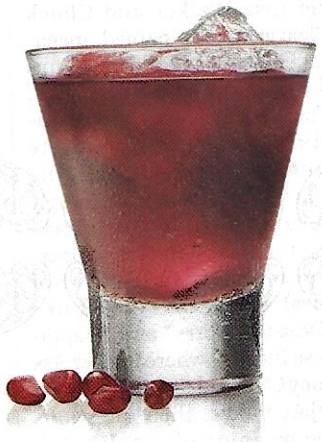
Thrill Jockey

Brooklyn siblings keep their art rock weird

FOR A BROTHER-SISTER act on their eighth album, Fiery Furnaces' Eleanor and Matthew Friedberger remain remarkably, purposefully and gloriously out of joint. The duo's quirky cabaret rock spurts and skips with bursts of scatting, piano histrionics and electric-guitar spasms. Like previous albums, *I'm Going Away* is long on imaginative-but-uncatchy brain ticklers. But there are moments of pop bliss and twinges of *Ziggy Stardust*-era Bowie on the boppy, glammed-out "Charmaine Champagne." And "Lost at Sea," which has a Seventies-AM vibe, even concludes with – gasp! – a killer, bona fide groove. C.G.

Key Tracks: "Lost at Sea," "Even in the Rain"

THE PERFECT SUMMER MIX



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Wussy ★★★★

Wussy *Shake It*

Cincinnati foursome make you feel their pain

ON THE THIRD album from this Cincinnati quartet, frontpersons and real-life couple Lisa Walker and Chuck Cleaver turn in pained, megatuneful songs that can get under your skin something fierce. The album focuses on a crumbling relationship, complete with accusations of cheating and warbled apologies. Jangly guitars adorn the loosely rocking tunes, and the raw, upper-register voices effuse a touch of rural weirdness on cuts like "Dreadful Sorry" and "Happiness Bleeds," where former Ass Pony Cleaver drinks booze from a jar, pukes, then questions the meaning of life. *Wussy*'s lyrics are sad, but its very memorable music never wallows in despair. CHRISTIAN HOARD

Key Tracks: "Happiness Bleeds," "Las Vegas"

BOOTLEG

U2

June 30th, 2009
Camp Nou, Barcelona

U2 have performed "One" at just about every concert they've played since writing the song 19 years ago, but on the opening night of their U2 360° Tour, it totally fell apart. "Can you all stop playing for a second?" an annoyed Bono says to the band as a shaky version of the song comes to a complete halt in front of 90,000 people. "I'll count you all in." Bizarre fuck-ups aside, the tour's first night was a blazing success. New songs such as "Breathe" and "Unknown Caller" fit seamlessly with war horses like "Pride." Best of all are the rare tracks dusted off for the first time in decades, like "The Unforgettable Fire" and "Ultraviolet" – which has never sounded this funky. The two-hour stadium bonanza ends with a crowd singalong on "With or Without You" and a stunning "Moment of Surrender." By the time the band comes stateside, the show should be even better. ANDY GREENE

Japandroids ★★★½

Post-Nothing *Polyvinyl/Unfamiliar*

Vancouver noise-rock pair go girl-crazy with their jams

A GUITAR-AND-drums duo from Vancouver, Japandroids crank out eardrum-bursting noise rock that takes cues from alt-rock vets such as Hüsker Dü as well as contemporary bands like No Age. On their debut disc, *Post-Nothing*, guitarist Brian King and drummer David Prowse deliver a rush of fuzzed-out rockers and stoner-metal grooves, plus an awesomely bummed-out drone called "I Quit Girls." Unlike most arty noise bands, these guys don't take themselves too seriously. Instead, they get rip-roaring drunk ("Rockers East Vancouver") and wonder what it'd be like to "French-kiss some French girls." KEVIN O'DONNELL

Key Tracks: "Sovereignty," "Wet Hair"

Howling Bells ★★★

Radio Wars *Nettwerk*

Aussies make perfect soundtrack for a morphine jag

IF MAZZY STAR'S Hope Sandoval teamed up with shoegaze icons My Bloody Valentine, they might sound a lot like Australian crew Howling Bells. On their second album, *Radio Wars*, the Bells deliver billowy dream pop accented with atmospheric guitars, string arrangements and digitized beats. Juanita Stein has a sumptuous croon, and while her lyrics lack heft – "Let's be kids again/Life was so simple then" – her band compensates with lovely arrangements, particularly on the epic "Nightingale" and "Cities Burning Down," which cribs from U2's "With or Without You." Swallow some morphine and dig in. K.O.

Key Tracks: "Nightingale," "Cities Burning Down"

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FRICKE'S PICKS

By David Fricke

A Trucker's Solo Trip

Murdering Oscar (and other love songs) (Ruth St.), the new solo album by singer-guitarist **Patterson Hood** of roaring Georgians **Drive-By Truckers**, has a knotty back story. Hood was in rough straits in 1994 – recently divorced, without a band – when he began documenting the emotional wreckage in many of these songs: the sexual vengeance in "Screwtopia," the war with guilt in the title track. The hell wasn't all his – "Heavy and Hanging" was Hood's immediate response to Kurt Cobain's death – and the darkness lifts in later songs like "I Understand Now." But Hood, who formed the Truckers with guitarist Mike Cooley in 1996, would not start recording any of this material until 2005. That was our lucky break. What might have been, in '94, an album of oppressive self-pity crackles and gallops in the '05 sessions with weathered muscle and howling-wolf guitars, like a side road out of the Truckers' 2004 master blast, *The Dirty South*. Hood's band is also hauling big freight this season: *Live in Austin TX* (New West), a CD-DVD set of the Truckers' hot 2008 set on *Austin City Limits*; and a rarities bundle, *The Fine Print* (New West). The latter opens with a brawling Bob Dylan pastiche, "George Jones Talkin' Cell Phone Blues," then closes with the true grit: a cover-on-fire of "Like a Rolling Stone."

BRANTLEY GUTIERREZ

LONE TRUCKER Hood goes deep into his past on a new solo album.

High Holy Daze

"Please check the contents of your head," singer-bassist **Steve Kilbey** of the **Church** announced in his slow-rolling-wave baritone during the Australian band's New York gig on July 8th. "Items may have shifted during flight." Only for the better. For nearly 30 years, the Church's heavenly-treble raptures – driven by charter guitarists **Peter Koppes** and **Marty Willson-Piper** – have been one of rock's most dependable and still-evolving trips. The set list that night captured the constancy and mutation, going deep into the gothic-Byrds peal of 1982's *The Blurred Crusade* amid the stately-reverb suspense of "Deadman's Hand" and the creeping-pop poise of "Pangaea," both from the new *untitled #23* (Second Motion). A hypnotic enigma of measured pace and mounting-ring dynamics, the album is, in fact, the group's 23rd – a genuine milestone in longevity and psychedelic invention.

String Dreams

By itself, the first disc of the two-CD set *Open Strings: 1920s Middle Eastern Recordings/New Responses* (Honest Jon's) is an essential trip: torrid improvisations by local oud and violin masters such as **Nechat Bey**, **Sami Chawa** and **Abdul Hussein Khan Shahnazi**, recorded by EMI in Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Turkey, nearly 90 years ago. What is now casually dubbed freak folk was then the highest classical music. The performances are terse (they had to fit on a 78-rpm disc), but the cumulative effect is an intimate rising rhapsody. The rest of *Open Strings* is original modal "responses" to that virtuosity by devotees such as **Sir Richard Bishop** (ex-Sun City Girls), **Six Organs of Admittance** (a.k.a. **Ben Chasny**) and Scenic's **Bruce Licher**, all stars in their underground and all walking in the shadows of giants.

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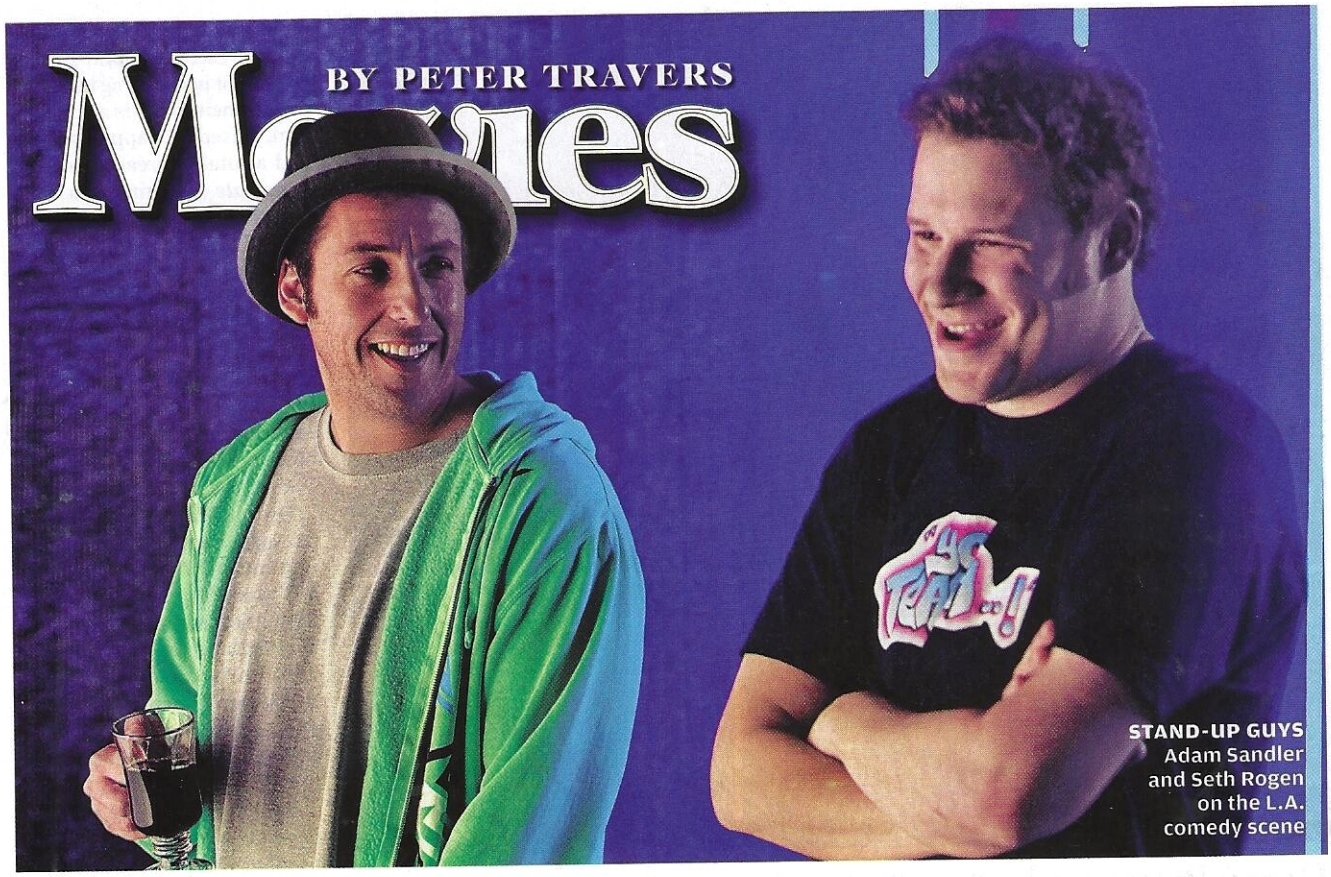
BY PETER TRAVERS

Movies



STAND-UP GUYS Adam Sandler and Seth Rogen on the L.A. comedy scene

Laughter in the Dark

Adam Sandler is dying in Judd Apatow's movie. Not to worry, it's the comedy that's hard

Funny People

★★★½

Adam Sandler, Seth Rogen, Eric Bana, Leslie Mann

Directed by Judd Apatow

ADVANCE BUZZ HAD TAGGED *Funny People* as Judd Apatow's "cancer comedy." Actually, it's leukemia that's putting the squeeze on George Simmons, the jerk-off star of dumb family movies and raunchy stand-up. Adam Sandler, relaxed, focused, alert to nuance, plays George, and it's his best performance ever (right up there with *Punch-Drunk Love*). Forget tear-jerking. Apatow writes with warmth and wit, but he's no soft touch. He knows George can be a cruel bastard, impossible to live with, but the fucker is funny. Jokes have always been his weapons of choice.

The same goes for Apatow. This is only his third film as a director, following *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*, but his influence is so pervasive that he's credited or blamed for every bromance on the market. The potently hilarious *Funny People*, shot by *Schindler's List* Oscar winner Janusz Kaminski, no less, is Apatow's most personal film. He roomed with Sandler when they first came to L.A. They both did stand-up, only Sandler was better at it.

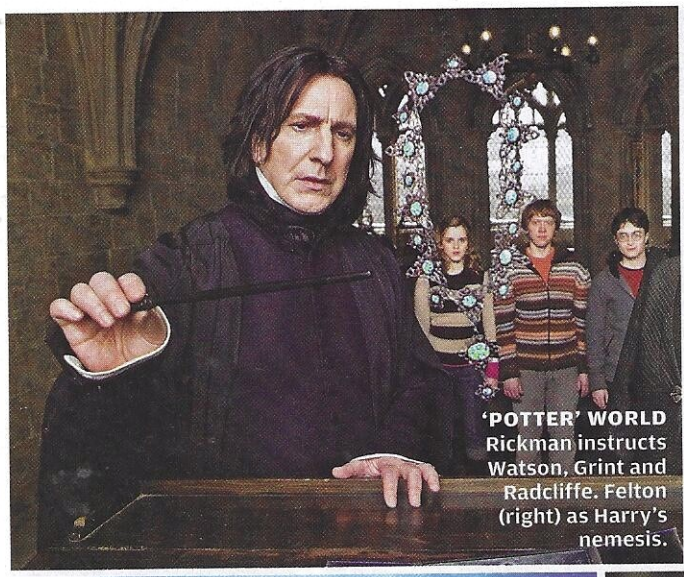
Seth Rogen basically has the Apatow role as Ira – "Schmyra," to George – the struggling writer whom the big star brings in to create material for his act. He's amazed at the babes who lay down for his boss. "I'm a story they tell their friends," shrugs George, a pussy hound with no illusions. At the start, Ira is the only one George tells about his disease. They bond, but only till Ira gets too close. Then he's reminded, "You're not my friend, you work for me." Apatow has taken pains to say that this is not a biopic. George is a nightmare version of what he and Sandler might have become without the healing balance of wives and children.

That part of the equation is represented by Leslie Mann (Mrs. Apatow) as Laura, the girl George lost by cheating on her. Now mired in a bad marriage to a skirt-chasing Aussie (Eric Bana demonstrating real comic flair), Laura takes solace in their two children, played by the director's two adorable daughters with Mann, Iris and Maude Apatow. Learning of George's illness and possible remission, Laura is pulled apart emotionally. Mann, one of the strongest arguments for nepotism in the business, is simply sensational in the role, finding the right blend of humor and heartbreak in a woman who is understandably reluctant to give her trust to a man.

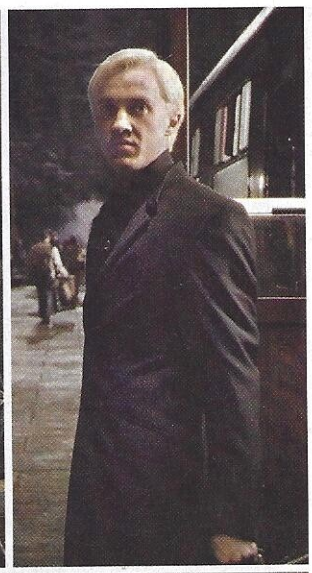
Laura's divided loyalties are symptomatic of the film. Apatow has many stories to tell, too many. Ira's life in the house he shares with two competitive friends – a riotous Jonah Hill, as a fellow writer, and a terrific Jason Schwartzman (he also did the music) as an actor who stars in the deliciously demented sitcom *Yo, Teach* – could be its own movie, and a good one.

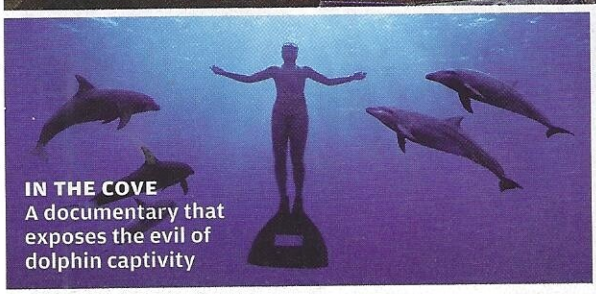
But the soul of *Funny People* is in the stand-up. Rogen, wonderful throughout, is a hoot delivering a bit about Tom Cruise, David Beckham and Will Smith mushing the tips of their dicks together just because they're bored rich guys. And it's a treat watching Sandler mix it up with other comics, including Paul Reiser, Sarah Silverman and Ray Romano. There are lots of guest shots, including a killer one from Eminem, who tells George he'd be better off dead than making more stupid movies. Food for thought. But no worries about this perceptive, deeply entertaining boundary-pusher. It's the work of a major talent. Apatow scores by crafting the film equivalent of a stand-up routine that encompasses the joy, pain, anger, loneliness and aching doubt that go into making an audience laugh. For his funny people, that really is a matter of life and death.

TRACY BENNETT/UNIVERSAL PICTURES

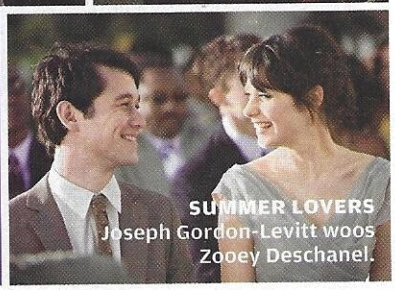


'POTTER' WORLD
Rickman instructs Watson, Grint and Radcliffe. Felton (right) as Harry's nemesis.





IN THE COVE
A documentary that exposes the evil of dolphin captivity



SUMMER LOVERS
Joseph Gordon-Levitt woos Zooey Deschanel.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince ★★★½

Daniel Radcliffe, Alan Rickman, Tom Felton

Directed by David Yates

HARRY IS BETTER THAN ever, a triumph of visual wonder and emotional storytelling. Only Muggles, who wouldn't know Slytherin from Gryffindor, will dismiss it as kid stuff for the multitudes who drank the Kool-Aid of J.K. Rowling's seven books. The rap on *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince,* the sixth of Rowling's books to be filmed (number seven will be two movies), is that it's an interim tease, all buildup and no release. Like that's bad. Like character and motivation have no place after Michael Bay banished them in *Transformers 2*.

David Yates, who directed *Order of the Phoenix* in 2007 and will steer the *Potter* films to the finish line, energizes the quiet strengths in the Steve Kloves script. A major character dies. And a minor one – the half-blood prince who's been scheming behind the scenes – rises to the fore. Romance? Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) pines for Ginny Weasley (Bonnie Wright), and Hermione (Emma Watson) watches in jealous disgust as Ron Weasley (Rupert Grint), Harry's BFF and Ginny's brother, imbibes a love potion that makes him the sex slave of anyone he encounters. I exaggerated the kinky part – the movie is rated PG, though Grint is a comic delight in hormonal transport.

What makes *Half-Blood Prince* top-tier is the descent of darkness on the lives of these characters. The unseen Lord Voldemort cooks up fresh hell by planning to have Harry's archrival, the blond, bullying Draco Malfoy (Tom Felton), kill wise old Professor Dumbledore (Michael Gambon). And then there's slithery Severus Snape (the great Alan Rickman) making a deal to protect Draco. I'll never tell why, except to say that it's a pleasure to watch the mesmerizing Felton take the role to the next level, discovering a vulnerable humanity in Draco. And Rickman is a dynamo, lacing the Severus sneer with glimmers of conscience and moral doubt.

All the actors excel at pulling us into the film's mysteries. Radcliffe's growing maturity as Harry gives the role a touching gravity. His scenes with Gambon, superb as Dumbledore, exude ferocity and emotion, notably when they seek a Horcrux, where part of the Dark Lord's soul resides, on a lake teeming with undead corpses. It's scary, resonant magic, poetically shot by Bruno Delbonnel. The shadows, and the dangers lurking within, have always drawn me deepest into *Potter* World. Newcomers shouldn't worry about playing catch-up. Getting lost in the hypnotic *Half-Blood Prince* is what gives the movie its haunting power.

(500) Days of Summer ★★★½

Zooey Deschanel and Joseph Gordon-Levitt

Directed by Marc Webb

BOY MEETS GIRL, BOY LOSES girl. It's been done to emo death. That's why the sublimely smart-sexy-joyful-sad *(500) Days of Summer* hits you like a blast of pure romantic oxygen. It turns the genre on its empty head and sees relationships for what they are: a bruising business. Someone's heart always gets ripped out. Meet Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt, letting his charm flag fly), a would-be architect idling in L.A. as a writer of greeting cards. In strolls his boss's new assistant, Summer (the glorious Zooey Deschanel), and Tom's a goner. For her, prizing independence, their affair is a lark. For him, raised on sappy Brit pop and a total misreading of *The Graduate* (he thinks the ending is happy), it's love. So when she walks away, firmly but with kindness, you feel the pain, the kind that evaporates quickly only on sitcoms.

Marc Webb is a debuting feature director with style to burn. With a seriously funny and touching script by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, the movie spins a variation on *Memento,* shuffling through Tom's 500 days with Summer in a random order that lets us see the fun times and the fault lines. A gimmick? Maybe. But Deschanel and Gordon-Levitt are star-crossed lovers to die for. They play it for real, with a grasp of subtlety and feeling that goes beyond the call of breezy duty.

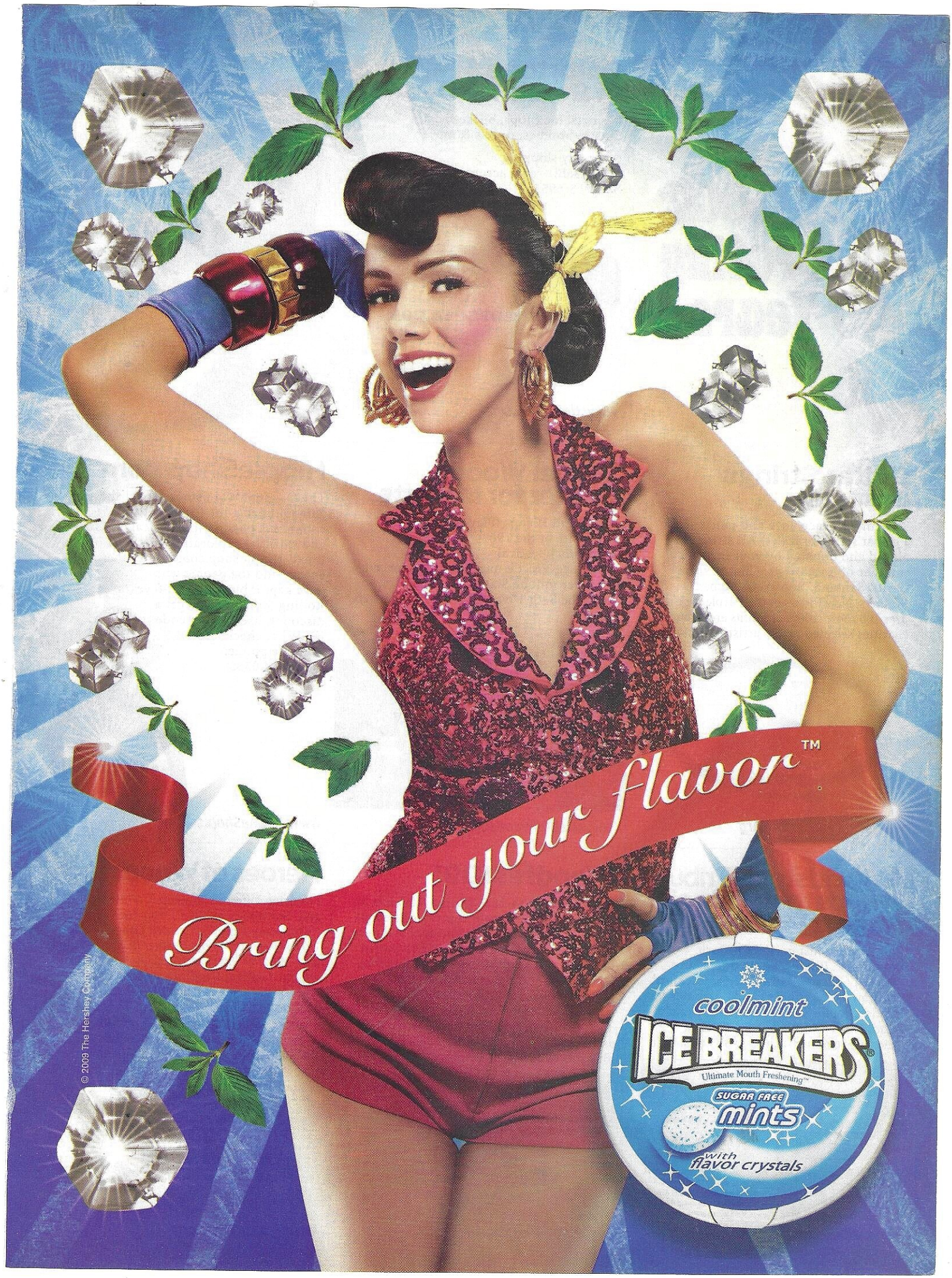
This knockout of a movie expertly blends bliss (a dance number complete with an animated blue jay after Tom spends his first night in bed with Summer) and the blues (a split-screen segment in which Tom's expectation of winning back Summer clashes with reality). The ending is tidy and way too cute, but *(500) Days* is otherwise a different kind of love story: an honest one that takes a piece out of you.

The Cove ★★★

Directed by Louie Psihoyos

IN TAIJI, JAPAN, FISHERMEN lure dolphins, about 23,000 a year, into a hidden cove and brutally harpoon them to sell their often-contaminated flesh as whale meat. Director Louie Psihoyos, aided by Richard O'Barry, a former dolphin trainer (he worked on the TV series *Flipper*), joins with other advocates (*Heroes* actress Hayden Panettiere included) to stop this barbaric slaughter of innocents. But first they have to risk jail to install hidden cameras and expose the atrocity to the world. *The Cove* plays like a thriller. It has the breathless pace of a *Bourne* movie, but none of the comfort of fiction. This is documentary filmmaking at its most exciting and purposeful.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JAAP BUITENDIJK/WARNER BROS. PICTURES; WARNER BROS. PICTURES; CHUCK ZLOTNICK; LOUIE PSIHOYOS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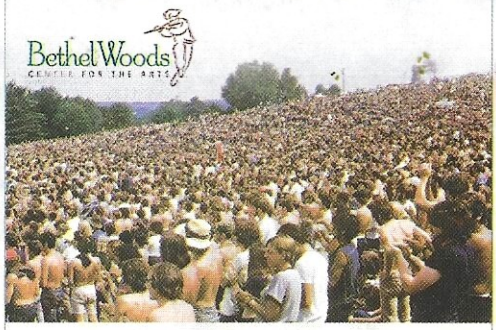

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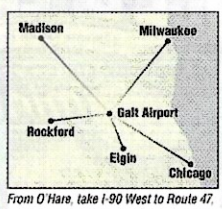

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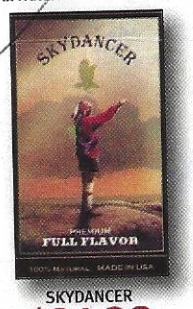

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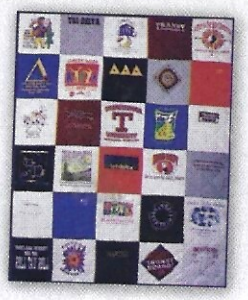

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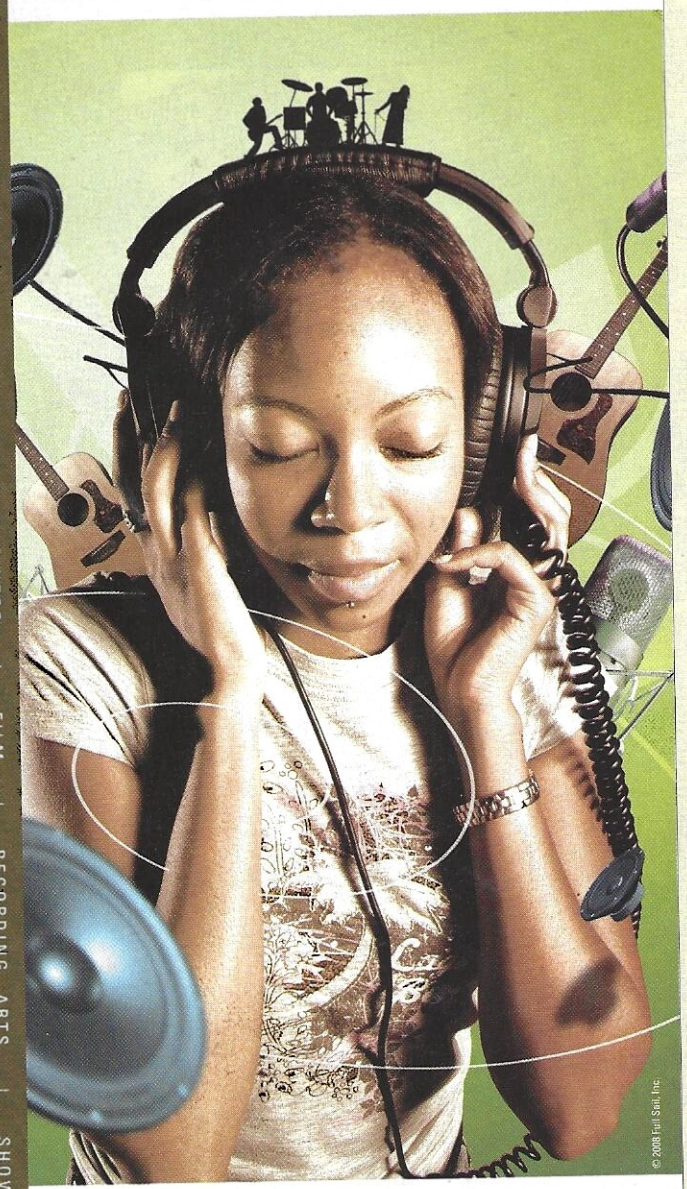

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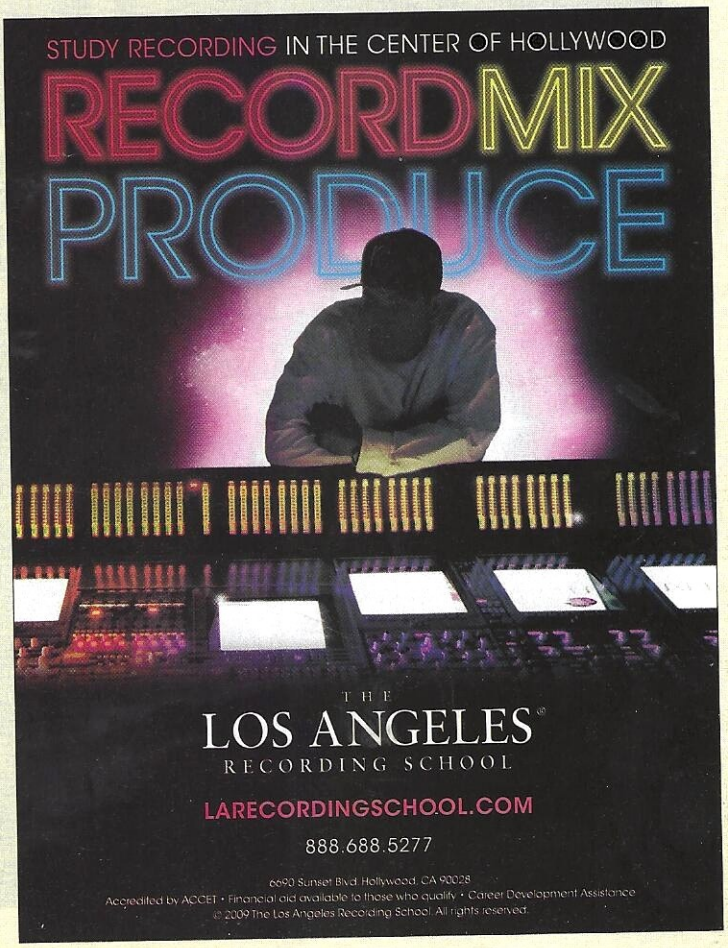

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ROB THOMAS

[*Cont. from 57*] on end, hitchhiking up and down the coastline, fending off weirdos who said stuff like, "Do you mind if we pull over up here and I suck you?" stealing cars with his friends ("I was more a follower than a leader"), doing two months in the county jail ("Everything about me said I was heading down Loser Row"), playing in various bands and working at a biker bar called B.T. Bones, where he became known as the Singing Busboy.

Thomas was taking a lot of acid in those days, and during one trip he decided it would be a good idea to play around with dry ice. He burned his hands so badly that doctors thought he might have to get them chopped off. He was sitting in a clinic with his sister when he got the news. He started crying. "Missy," he said, "how am I going to get these songs in my head out if I can't play them?" Recalls Melissa, "I was worried about him having no hands, and all he was worried about was the music."

In 1993, Thomas joined a Gainesville, Florida, band called Tabitha's Secret. "We were the big local band, and we thought we were the shit," he says. Shortly thereafter, that band morphed into Matchbox Twenty, got signed by Atlantic and released *Yourself or Someone Like You*. The group toured relentlessly behind the album, and by 2000, it had gone platinum 10 times, and, in so doing, positioned Matchbox Twenty as the big breakout band of the late Nineties.

"It was a slow climb – we had every chance to fuck up, but nobody was watching and nobody cared," Thomas says. "We could be as debauched as we wanted to be. Later, I'd run into these girls: 'You don't remember me? My girlfriend and I lived on your bus for a week.' And I'm like, 'Sorry. If it happened in the first three or four years, it's gone.'"

Along the way, Thomas patched things up with his mom, but she continued to wreak havoc on his life. She'd show up drunk at his concerts, and he'd have to boot her out. She'd find ways to terrify Marisol, who is a Puerto Rican from Queens, New York, and he would find ways to excuse it. He refused to speak truthfully about his mother in public, for fear of hurting her feelings.

"He had a strange relationship with his mother," says Matt Serletic, Thomas' longtime producer. "He'd run from her but also want her approval. She was half-crazy and very loving and yet very vindictive. A lot of it had to do with his marriage. It's one of those things that was never quite approved of." And then when she died three years ago, he simply fell apart.

"I went on a nasty drinking binge and couldn't stop," Thomas says. "I was mad she had left and I could no longer be angry at her. And then I started to get this feeling that right around the corner, something horrible was waiting. After that, I completely lost my coping skills." He goes on, "Look, I readily admit to being totally fucked up, and I don't need people to always know, 'Hey, I'm in pain here, look at me, I'm in fucking pain.' But this feels like the most adult burden I've ever had to carry, and I think it's necessary to talk about it, because it's a huge part of who I am and the reason I am the way I am."

And Marisol, for one, is glad that he's finally opening up.

"You know what bothers me?" she says finally. "I truly believe that Rob is one of the most gifted songwriters of our time, but people like to pass over him like he's this really blandified, middle-class guy, and you have these pseudo-punker kids playing as if they're from the street and they're hardcore. They grew up with money in the suburbs. Well, my husband had the worst fucking upbringing. So when people try to paint him as this guy who is full of shit, it really upsets me. He's overcome a lot. If only he'd been able to express his feelings early on. But he came from a family of 'deny, deny, deny, and don't talk about shit.'"

Thomas doesn't say anything immediately. He just sits there. At last, he says, "Everything's going to surface." And the way he says it, it's almost like a promise.

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[*Cont. from 65*] was before, to a place of innocence," Westerlund says.

Usually, before smuggling missions, Brown would say goodbye to his sisters and his father. But this time he didn't get in touch with anyone. He just loaded up the helicopter and left.

TWO DAYS LATER, LOU was working in his sawmill shop when a friend of Sam's showed up and asked if he had heard from Sam. Lou said he hadn't. The friend, a drug trafficker himself, was worried. It wasn't like Sam not to call, and considering the treacherous weather he had flown through, there was a strong possibility that he had wrapped himself around a tree or run into the side of a mountain. Lou had no idea where Sam was going, other than across the border, meaning he would have to search hundreds of miles of snow-covered mountains if he wanted to find his son. He had no choice, he realized, but to sit and wait.

It took three days to find out that Brown had been arrested. When he landed the helicopter in the Colville National Forest in Washington, DEA agents were waiting behind the trees for him. As Brown exited the helicopter that night, unloading the hockey bags full of pot into a waiting truck, the agents took him into custody. Two days earlier, it turned out, highway-patrol officers had pulled over two men near Salt Lake City. In the trunk of their car, officers discovered 83 kilos of cocaine. The two men, one from British Columbia and one from Las Vegas, told the cops they were headed to eastern Washington, where they were planning to trade it for a load of B.C. Bud, the load Brown was scheduled to deliver.

The DEA officers who arrested Brown were actually stunned that he had made the trip in such terrible weather conditions. "The helicopter came through the rain, fog and darkness," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Tom Rice. It was a feat that even the most skilled pilot would be lucky to pull off. Brown, who was unarmed, was booked into the Spokane County Jail. When public defenders met with him the next day, he appeared in good spirits. When asked why he did the run, Brown shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "It's all about the adventure," he said.

In some ways, Lou was relieved: At least Sam hadn't crashed and died in the snowstorm. Friends started making plans to get Brown extradited. And if he did have to do a stint in a U.S. prison, they'd make sure he had everything he needed when he got out.

But four days after Brown's arrest, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer showed up at the house of Sam's younger sister Elinor. Standing on the porch, a bare bulb illuminating her face, the officer delivered the news in a flat, professional tone. On February 27th, a guard in the Spokane County Jail checked Brown's cell at about 1:20 p.m. and saw something odd. A towel had been placed over the window of the door. When guards entered, they found Brown hanging by a bedsheet from a wall-mounted light fixture.

When Lou heard the news, he knew he had to keep his shit together; everyone around him would be falling apart over the coming days. He had lost his father to a logging accident and a brother to drowning, and he knew that the only way he could process his grief was by putting himself to work. And so there in his sawmill shop, he began building a coffin for his only son.

Friends came in and out of the shop to grieve, and as they did, each took turns on the coffin. Brown's younger sister Casey painted a picture of her brother's most famous trail on the lid, and someone else welded bicycle handlebars on the sides for the pallbearers. "It became this big communal thing," Lou recalls. "We had Sam's favorite music playing, we had pizza and beer, and for a day and a half we worked on this thing. People would see the coffin and start crying. They'd sand it and tell stories about Sammy." When the cof-

fin was finished, Lou put it in the back of his truck, covered it with a blue tarp and drove to Spokane to pick up his son.

Lou refuses to believe that Sam killed himself. His son would have left a note, he says, or at least made a point of saying goodbye. "Maybe he did it to protect one of us," his father says. "Maybe there was a threat. We'll never know."

But Spokane County officials say there's no evidence to support anything other than suicide. The light fixture from which Brown hanged himself was rounded and sloped downward, specifically to prevent suicides. Always able to figure out how things worked, Brown had jimmied it far enough from the wall so he could jam the bedsheet behind the base to hold his weight. "He seemed very committed," a jail spokesman said after the body was found.

Sitting in his jail cell, Brown must have known that someone had betrayed him. Maybe it was someone connected to Colin Martin. Brown had taken off in the helicopter from property owned by Martin's wife. Two days after Brown's arrest, Martin reported the helicopter stolen – a story that DEA agents immediately dismissed. (Sources close to the investigation believe that Brown was answering to Martin. Martin has denied any involvement.) Or maybe it was the woman he loved, Lucretia James, who was already in prison. "They could have told him it was me," says one of his friends. "They could have told him it was Lucretia. They would have told him anything to make him break."

Or maybe it was something else. Maybe Brown simply couldn't stand the thought of spending 10 years in a space as confined and stifling as a cellblock. "I've thought about that a lot," says Tyler Riddell, a friend. "Sam was a bush child. To him, prison would have felt like a living grave."

Looking back, some of Brown's friends and family realize that he was troubled, and that they had failed to see the warning signs. In the final weeks of his life, he donated all his clothing to a thrift store in Nelson, sold his mountain bike to a friend and packed everything he owned into a shipping crate on his father's property. It was as if he was preparing to go away and never come back.

Ten days after Brown's arrest, the DEA nabbed another helicopter pilot trying to deliver weed to a drop point in northern Idaho. The pilot was not much older than Brown, and from the same area. He even worked for the same smuggling ring. At a press conference announcing the arrest, U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Sullivan was asked what he thought the bust had accomplished.

"We've stopped at least this group and crippled this part of the organization," Sullivan answered. "Will somebody take their place? Unfortunately, probably."

If Sam Brown had stayed in the mountains that he loved, there is no guarantee that he would be alive today. He might have been killed in a logging accident, like his grandfather. He might have died on his bike, performing some wild freeriding stunt that no one else would even attempt to pull off. He was the Man From the Bush, a guy who courted danger at every turn. Those who knew him are still struggling to come to grips with the loss of their friend – but in the wilderness of the Kootenays where Sam Brown made a name for himself, the pot business hasn't missed a beat.

"Every day weed crosses the border, and that's never going to stop," says one of Brown's closest friends. "Yeah, maybe Sam took it too far, but he shouldn't have had to die. He was just a kid chasing a thrill." RS

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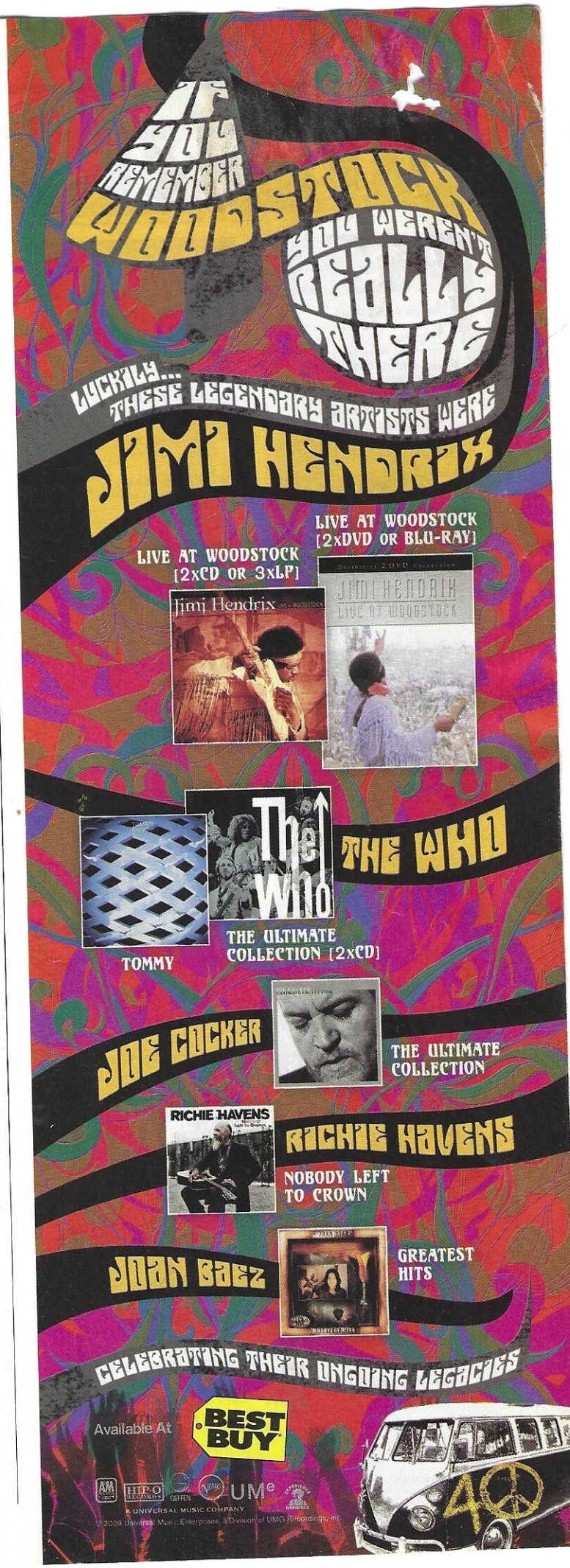

CHARTS

iTUNES TOP 10 SONGS

1. **Black Eyed Peas** "I Gotta Feeling" - *Will.i.am/Interscope*
2. **Hannah Montana** "He Could Be the One" - *Walt Disney*
3. **Michael Jackson** "Man in the Mirror" - *Epic*

4. **Mariah Carey** "Obsessed" - *Island*
5. **Sean Kingston** "Fire Burning" - *Beluga Heights*
6. **Black Eyed Peas** "Boom Boom Pow" - *Will.i.am/Interscope*
7. **Boys Like Girls** "Love Drunk" - *Columbia*
8. **Taylor Swift** "You Belong With Me" - *Big Machine*
9. **Drake** "Best I Ever Had" - *Bryant*
10. **Michael Jackson** "Billie Jean" - *Epic*

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1. **Dirty Projectors** Bitte Orca - *Domino*
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3. **Sonic Youth** The Eternal - *Matador*
4. **Dinosaur Jr.** Farm - *Jagjaguwar*
5. **Grizzly Bear** Veckatimest - *Warp*
6. **Phoenix** Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix - *Loyauté/Glassnote*
7. **Eels** Hombre Lobo: 12 Songs of Desire - *Vagrant*
8. **Deer Tick** Born on Flag Day - *Partisan*
9. **Sunset Rubdown** Dragonslayer - *Jagjaguwar*
10. **Regina Spektor** Far - *Sire*

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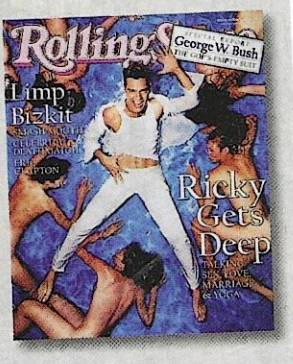
From the Vault

RS 818, August 5th, 1999

TOP 10 SINGLES

1. **Christina Aguilera** "Genie in a Bottle" - *RCA*
2. **Destiny's Child** "Bills, Bills, Bills" - *Columbia*
3. **K-Ci and JoJo** "Tell Me It's Real" - *MCA*
4. **Will Smith** "Wild Wild West" - *Overbrook*
5. **Jennifer Lopez** "If You Had My Love" - *Epic/Work*
6. **Pearl Jam** "Last Kiss" - *Epic*
7. **Smash Mouth** "All Star" - *Interscope*
8. **Backstreet Boys** "I Want It That Way" - *Jive*
9. **702** "Where My Girls At?" - *Motown*
10. **LFO** "Summer Girls" - *Logic/Arista*



On the Cover

"When my friends asked me why I wanted to be in Menudo, I'd say, 'The fame, fortune and girls.' My first kiss was when I was 13, and it was really wet. I stopped being a virgin when I was 14. In Argentina. The women there are beautiful."

—*Ricky Martin*

Top 40 Albums

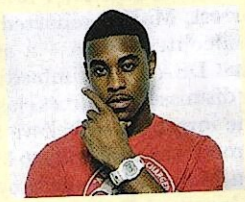
1	NEW	**Maxwell**	BLACKsummers'night - *Columbia*
2	NEW	**Hannah Montana 3**	Soundtrack - *Walt Disney*
3	1	**NOW 31**	Various Artists - *EMI/Universal/Zomba*
4	NEW	**All Time Low**	Nothing Personal - *Hopeless*
5	5	**Black Eyed Peas**	The E.N.D. - *Will.i.am/Interscope*
6	2	**Brad Paisley**	American Saturday Night - *Arista Nashville*
7	3	**Rob Thomas**	Cradlesong - *Emblem/Atlantic*
8	11	**Taylor Swift**	Fearless - *Big Machine*
9	9	**Eminem**	Relapse - *Web/Shady/Aftermath/Interscope*
10	8	**Jonas Brothers**	Lines, Vines and Trying Times - *Hollywood*
11	4	**Wilco**	Wilco (The Album) - *Nonesuch*
12	12	**Hannah Montana: The Movie**	Soundtrack - *Walt Disney*
13	10	**Lady Gaga**	The Fame - *Streamline/KonLive/Cherrytree/Interscope*
14	14	**Kings of Leon**	Only by the Night - *RCA*
15	6	**Jeremih**	Jeremih - *Mick Schultz/Def Jam*
16	16	**Green Day**	21st Century Breakdown - *Reprise*
17	17	**Zac Brown Band**	The Foundation - *Roar/Big Picture/Home Grown/Atlantic*
18	20	**Nickelback**	Dark Horse - *Roadrunner*
19	15	**Dave Matthews Band**	Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King - *Bama Rags/RCA*
20	18	**Jason Aldean**	Wide Open - *Broken Bow*
21	7	**Killswitch Engage**	Killswitch Engage - *Roadrunner*
22	24	**Darius Rucker**	Learn to Live - *Capitol Nashville*
23	13	**Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen – the Album**	Soundtrack - *Reprise*
24	19	**Kenny Chesney**	Greatest Hits II - *BNA*
25	27	**Rascal Flatts**	Unstoppable - *Lyric Street*
26	29	**Shinedown**	The Sound of Madness - *Atlantic*
27	28	**Lady Antebellum**	Lady Antebellum - *Capitol Nashville*
28	21	**Chickenfoot**	Chickenfoot - *Redline*
29	30	**Twilight**	Soundtrack - *Summit/Chop Shop/Atlantic*
30	31	**Beyoncé**	I Am . . . Sasha Fierce - *Music World/Columbia*
31	33	**Pink**	Funhouse - *LaFace*
32	26	**Regina Spektor**	Far - *Sire*
33	NEW	**LMFAO**	Party Rock - *Party Rock/Will.i.am/Cherrytree/Interscope*
34	35	**Ginuwine**	A Man's Thoughts - *Notifi/Asylum*
35	61 ↑	**Chrisette Michele**	Epiphany - *Def Jam*
36	34	**American Idol: Season 8**	Various Artists - *19/RCA*
37	42	**Billy Currington**	Little Bit of Everything - *Mercury Nashville*
38	44	**Taylor Swift**	Taylor Swift - *Big Machine*
39	38	**Theory of a Deadman**	Scars & Souvenirs - *604*
40	40	**NOW 30**	Various Artists - *Universal/EMI/Sony Music/Zomba*

Maxwell Returns

After an eight-year break, the soul singer is back with a disc of slow jams. Fueled by the hit "Pretty Wings," the CD debuted with 316,499 copies.

Wilco (The Hit)

Despite the fact that the record leaked seven weeks early – and was streamed on the band's site – Wilco's seventh LP still earned them a career-high debut.



Jeremih's Spoken

Chicago R&B singer Jeremih Felton, 21, exploded onto radio with his debut single, "Birthday Sex." His first album has sold 87,477 in its first two weeks.

Miami Nice

Electro-rap duo LMFAO had a YouTube hit with "I'm in Miami Bitch." Their Will.i.am-executive-produced debut sold 11,482 copies its first week out.

00 Chart position on July 15th, 2009
00 Chart position on July 8th, 2009
NEW New Entry ↑ Greatest Gainer
2ND Re-Entry

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Billboard. www.billboard.com

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MIRRORPIX/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION; ERIC JOHNSON; AUTUMN DE WILDE; JIM WRIGHT; HANNAH ROSS; ADRIA PETTY

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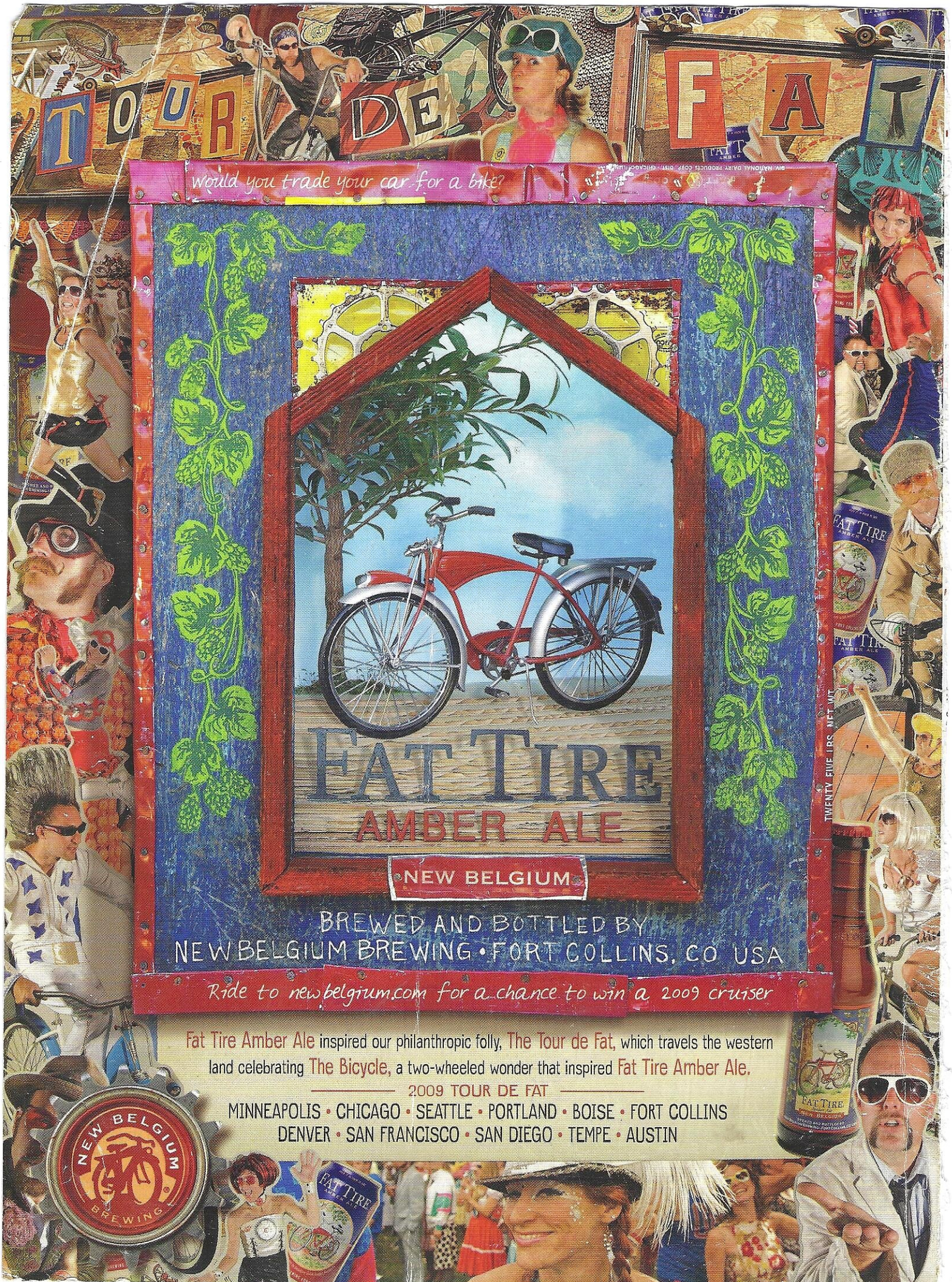
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